

Christmas in Visher Ferry

an original screenplay

written by

Peter Osterhaus



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DISCLAIMER

Though Visher Ferry is a real place in upper New York State, the locales, characters and situations depicted in this drama are fictitious, and any resemblance to any person, alive or dead, is purely coincidence.

GLOSSARY

For those of you who are new to screenplay format, here are a few commonly used terms. Otherwise, it reads just like a stage play.

<u>Term:</u>	<u>Description:</u>
INT.	Interior location
EXT.	Exterior location
V.O.	Voice Over – You hear the voice, but the character isn't visible
O.S.	Off Screen – Spoken off camera; <i>i.e.</i> , present but not seen
C.S.	Close shot
E.C.S. or EXTREME CLOSE	Extreme close shot
L.S.	Long shot
CONTINUOUS	Time flows unimpeded from one scene to the next
/	A traveling shot, usually in connection with a moving vehicle (<i>e.g.</i> , SQUAD CAR/MC CLINTOCK ST.)
&	An intersection (<i>e.g.</i> , HILL ST. & MAIN)
POV	Point of View — usually used in connection with a character
NAME IN ALL CAPS	First appearance of a character's name
WORD IN ALL CAPS	Primary focus of the camera or sound recording (<i>i.e.</i> , "ROSE PETAL" or "GUN SHOT")
[...]	Biblical reference. (<i>e.g.</i> , [Lam. 1:2] = Lamentations, Chapter 1, Verse 2). Unique to this script!
CUT TO	Abrupt scene change
DISSOLVE TO	One shot dissolves into another — a slower change of scene

DEDICATION

for

Julia Cameron

who helped clear the path

INT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

Nestled in a vast cavern of space, a friendly fire crackles in a stone fire-place. A hand loomed rug curls atop a pegged, hardwood floor stretching in two planes to infinity. An elderly man rocks in a rocking chair with his four-year-old granddaughter on his lap. GRANDPA has a shock of white hair and wears a robe and pajamas.

Also dressed for sleep is pretty WENDY, a spitfire of a princess, though a tad too confident of her own adorableness. Grandpa reads from a large illustrated book. We PULL IN slowly from a great distance.

GRANDPA

... and the ghost ate the fairy godmother and all the tiny tinker bells trotted off to the suburbs to buy a condo on time-share. The End.

WENDY

That's not a real Christmas story. Read me a real Christmas story, like the one you read last year.

GRANDPA

Last year? I think I had a few cubits of RAM back then. Last year, you say? What did you say your name was, little girl?

WENDY

(cuffs him on the chin)

Wendy, silly Grandpa. Can't you remember?

GRANDPA

Lorraine? Yes, I seem to remember ...

WENDY

Tell me a story about a haunted house — no wait! A nice house but a secret in the attic — make it the basement! Hooo, creepy. And how about a forest creature too. Only he's not a real forest creature, he's human, but nobody knows. Or — I know! I know! — an admitting nurse with a poisoned thermometer who is sheer crazy! And then — oh! oh!

(clapping wickedly)

And a Sheriff who shuts down all the freeways and steals the pretty ladies!

GRANDPA

Lorraine, you say?

WENDY

Come on, I know you can do it! Summon up a few cubits for your devoted granddaughter —
(in his face)
and tell it!

GRANDPA

A Christmas story, huh? With a secret in the attic — no the basement, sorry — and a forest nymph who is really a man? Or was it a woman?

WENDY

Forest creature. Guess!

GRANDPA

Nymph, creature, they're all the same. And a crazed nurse with a poisoned thermometer. Is this a comedy?

WENDY

No, silly. I'll give you a kiss. It'll be a magic kiss, full of secret power. Then begin.

(prompts)

"'Twas the night before Christmas ..."

GRANDPA

Where's my kiss?

WENDY

(plants a nice one)

There, silly.

GRANDA

'Twas the nice before Christmas — oh! I feel the power! My brain's a' rattlin' with cosmological enzymes! Leapin' firecrackers! Electronic leaks of nondescript sort! Quick, call Con Ed!

WENDY

(getting serious)

"It was the nice before Christmas ..."

GRANDPA

... and all through the house, all the creatures were stirring 'cause they couldn't afford blenders in them days ...

WENDY

Oh, you ...

GRANDPA

Well are you gonna interrupt or are you gonna let
me tell the story?

WENDY

... bitch, bitch, bitch ...

GRANDPA

Now listen, Miss Missy ...

WENDY

Okay, so they couldn't afford shoes in "them" days
and had to walk five miles to school — barefoot.

GRANDPA

Actually, in my day it was penny loafers. But they
only got you through spring, summer and fall. In
winter, why, everyone wore big rubber boots all
buckled up to the nines! It was mighty cold in
them days. Powerful cold. Death rattlin' cold!
Supercalifragilistikexpialidosious cold. Why it was
so cold...

WENDY

(unimpressed)

Brrrr. Go on.

GRANDPA

Why one year, the temperature dropped to sixty
below. But that wasn't the worst part.

WENDY

(theatrically sarcastic)

It gets colder?

GRANDPA

There was a snowstorm. Worst snowfall in fifty
years. Sky dumped two feet in three hours. By
nightfall, another six inches. They had to close all
the freeways in five counties. Even the
snow-ploughs couldn't get through. It was the
night before the night before Christmas and all
through the county the highway patrol put up
roadblocks, diverting traffic. Hundred upon
hundreds of cars poured into these teeny tiny
towns with no room at the inn, or Best Western
either. Folks upon folks thinkin' they was goin'
where they was goin', but ain't.

WENDY
How colloquial ...

From a nightstand, Grandpa picks up a GLASS GLOBE with a tiny red cottage inside. He shakes it and all the snowflakes go airborne.

GRANDPA
As if God waved his Mighty Hand over the
country-side causing a swirling tarnation ...

WENDY
God has a hand?

GRANDPA
The Intention, the Will of creatin' a diversion so
people would be forced into a groove, a special
experience, a new challenge, to learn some lessons
in life.

WENDY
Tell about the swirling ...

GRANDPA
... the cold-knuckled wind whipped the trees a
bluish black! Herds of wild buffalo thundered
unseen across the low, Northern sky in a snap
freeze! "Twenty inches," wailed the frightened
newscaster! "All freeways above Greene County
closed! I'm dreaming of a white Christmas — from
the bowels of Antarctica! ..."

EXTREME CLOSE on SNOW GLOBE with its swirling flakes.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. OLD CADILLAC/NO. ON HWY 87 — NIGHT

An ancient humpbacked woman, GLORIA, navigates the luxurious sedan with faint gloved hands. Brass windshield wipers polish the snow with aplomb. The RADIO airs sedate classical music, when interrupted by an emergency newscast. GLORIA turns up the volume.

NEWSCASTER (V.O.)
... Bowels of Antarctica! Over twenty inches of
snow has fallen in three hours and more is
expected before morning! I repeat: all motorists
on northbound 87, and county highways 92 and 90,
are urged to seek shelter at the nearest
facility! The storm is traveling due east ...

Gloria turns off the radio; adjusts her seat electronically. A survivor of twelve demanding children, a top architect husband and frequent society functions, Gloria is not about to let a little foul weather alter her course.

INT. VW BUG/NO. ON HWY 87 — NIGHT

JULIA navigates the dense downfall in her rickety VW with difficulty. Her six year-old son, JASON, dressed for prep school and wearing a YARMULKE, kicks his feet restlessly. Though annoyed, Julia chooses mothering.

JULIA

Wrap that scarf around your neck. Where are your mittens? And pull up your hood.

(indicates yarmulke)

Take that off, we're not in Brooklyn Heights any-more. Don't worry, your father won't mind. Battle down the hatches, Skipper, we're in for a rough ride.

A good kid, Jason complies, but leaves on the yarmulke.

INT. BLACK LINCOLN CONTINENTAL/NO. ON HWY. 87 — NIGHT

DEBORAH's POV: FLASHING ROAD BARRICADES suddenly appear out of nowhere. The massive vehicle swerves onto an off ramp while Deborah whips the steering wheel back and forth.

DEBORAH

Shit!

She turns down MADAME BUTTERFLY'S ARIA blaring from the tape deck. A business leader and fiercely proud African American, Deborah shifts into command mode.

INT. COUNTY HWY. 92 — NIGHT

ARCHIE kneels beside the rear wheel of his CLOSED WHITE VAN while struggling to untangle TIRE CHAINS. Ice snaps at his fingers. Angry, in pain, he stands and hurls the chains over the snow embankment.

Archie opens the van, grabs an overnight bag, locks the door and starts walking, holding his thumb out for a ride.

INT. TOUR BUS/SO. ON HWY. 87 — NIGHT

A wild party rages inside the tour bus of heavy metal sensation "COMA." MUSICIANS, GROUPIES and HIJACKED FANS drink, smoke and dance like there is no tomorrow.

A pretty sixteen year-old, SHYLA, catches the eye of lead singer and bandleader, MICKEY. Tough, wiry and athletic, Mickey surveys Shyla's charms with a lion's eye.

Mickey's long-suffering girlfriend, CARLY, pops a grape in his mouth and clings possessively as they preside like rock royalty before the admiring throngs.

INT. MAYOR TOMPKIN'S LIVING ROOM — NIGHT

MAYOR ERNIE TOMPKINS barks into a telephone from a lazy boy perched before a raging fireplace in his upscale home. FIVE CHILDREN, ages 3 through 13, decorate the Christmas tree with noisy abandon. A BLOODHOUND whines for peace and quiet from the stone foyer. Ernie shouts above the din.

MAYOR TOMPKINS

I don't care what you have to do, shut down those roads and keep Dinah's open — yes, all night if you have to. What?

(pause)

Well that's a different story! I'll have to get the governor's okay on that. Highly irregular! That's the plan you say?

Ernie's "housewife from hell," SYLVIA, swings by dumping a huge scoop of bloody meat cubes into the dog dish and a plastic plate of holiday snacks on Ernie's corpulent belly. Used to pleasing all who can't abide him, Ernie nods "thank you" to Sylvia who scowls and exits.

ERNIE (Cont'd)

What's that you say? All right. I'll put on my hat and coat. Meet you at Dinah's in an hour.

Ernie hangs up. He starts to get up, then decides to finish his plate. He carefully tosses the raw veggies in the fire and scarfs up the fats and sweets.

EXT. CADILLAC/NO. ON HWY. 87 — NIGHT

The Cadillac sweeps past a freeway sign: "You are leaving Visher Ferry."

INT. CADILLAC/NO. ON HWY. 87 — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria turns on her right blinker; steers into the next off ramp.

EXT. EXIT RAMP, HWY. 87 — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The Cadillac slows and stops before a FLASHING TEMPORARY BARRI-CADE. Behind it stands a mountain of snow.

INT. CADILLAC/EXIT RAMP, HWY. 87 — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria casts worried glances in all directions. She opens the glove compartment and rifles through it for MAPS. Finding one, she fumbles it open. EXTREME CLOSE: her polished nail scratches across the page to Visher Ferry.

Gloria shifts in reverse. She drives backwards up the off ramp against traffic and onto the freeway. CARS HONK and SWERVE to avoid her. Terrified, she quickly shifts into drive and picks up speed.

INT. COMFORT INN MOTEL — NIGHT

A dark, orderly motel suite in deep repose. Suddenly, the door flies open, lights pop on, Mickey, Carly and their entourage barge in shouting and throwing bags on the beds, dressers and in corners. Mickey grabs Shyla and ducks into the bathroom, locking the door. Carly jumps up and down on the bed whipping the revelers into a frenzy.

INT. LOBBY, COMFORT INN — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The lobby swarms with displaced travelers. A line stretches from the front desk out the double doors. BOOKED GUESTS leave their rooms, relieved and satisfied. STRANDED GUESTS mill about nervously in line; some break rank and convert lobby couches and chairs into overnight encampments. THREE CLERKS struggle valiantly to retain decorum while turning Stranded Guests away.

EXT. PARKING LOT, COMFORT INN — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

A line wraps a quarter turn around the parking lot. Stranded Guests shuffle from foot to foot in the cold.

Snow-doused cars fill every parking space, while others jam every aisle trying to get in or out. HORNS HONK continually.

Just over the fence, where the freeway spills its contents, a line of cars waits for OFFICER MALONE and his FOUR DEPUTIES. Deborah's Lincoln Continental glides down the off ramp and joins the back of the line.

INT. LINCOLN/EXIT RAMP — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Deborah inches up next in line. She rolls down the window, takes off her gloves and turns up the heat.

DEBORAH

Shit, shit, shit, it's cold.

EXT. EXIT RAMP & MAIN — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Officer Malone talks leisurely to a HARRIED DRIVER. A former high school star quarterback and lady killer, Malone takes pride in command. The next car pulls up.

OFFICER MALONE

Good evening, traveler. Where are you heading?

(muffled response)

Well, not tonight, you're not. The roads are closed all the way to Glens Falls. There's only one motel in Visher Ferry and, as you see, it's full down.

(more muffled talk)

Look sir, if you'll pull up to that Deputy over there, he'll direct you to some hot grub and fine lodgings for the night. On your way now, and Merry Christmas!

The car drives off and the Continental pulls up. Equally commanding, by virtue of her handsome looks and sheer force of will, Deborah speaks up.

DEBORAH

Yes, Officer, what's happening here?

OFFICER MALONE

No need for alarm, Ma'am, but the roads are all blocked until the plows can move this snow.

DEBORAH

I had business in Reed River Flow. Is there any other route I can take? A back way in?

OFFICER MALONE

I've been authorized by the governor to invoke emergency rescue relief. I have a place for you for the night, if you're not too particular about the

accommodations. Deputy Bilke will give you full details.

DEBORAH

Emergency relief? I guess I'll settle for a hotel room if you'll be kind enough to point the way.

OFFICER MALONE

Sorry ma'am, we have only one motel and it's log jammed full. You can't even get in the parking lot. There's not another town for fifty miles. Every road is shut down in every direction. Ma'am, this is an emergency situation so if you'll just scale down expectations and follow our directives, you'll be safe for the duration.

DEBORAH

But Officer! With whom? With whom shall I be spending the night?

OFFICER MALONE

His name is Joe Martin. He's offering his place, free of charge.

DEBORAH

You want me to spend the night with a strange man? Officer, this is impossible!

OFFICER MALONE

Look, he's my nephew, okay? Now, how much gas you got?

DEBORAH

Three quarters of a tank.

OFFICER MALONE

That should get you the 'point nine kilometers from here to Joe's. Even with your Lincoln. Now off you go.

DEBORAH

Officer, I simply cannot —

OFFICER MALONE

Leave him a tip! There's twenty more cars waiting, ma'am.

DEBORAH

Oh, really!

Deborah spins the tires angrily on the ice and skids off.

OFFICER MALONE

You're welcome, and a Merry Christmas to you,
too, ma'am.

INT. DINAH'S LANTERN (A DINER) — NIGHT

Intimidated by the over-crowded diner, Julia and Jason huddle quietly over a single meal of poor quality.

The WAITRESS sets down a glass of milk with a straw in it.

WAITRESS

I'm very sorry, ma'am: this one I know is fresh.

Julia snatches the glass from Jason and sniffs it. Satisfied, she sets it before him. Newly on anti-depressants and suffering sleep deprivation, Julia is edgy and volatile.

JASON

Daddy knew how to put chains on the tires.

JULIA

Well, your father isn't here any more and we've got
to learn to do things for ourselves."

(indicates yarmulke)

Take it off, please? For once, for me? This is
gun-toting Bible country and I'm scared half to
death.

Officer Malone enters and hands Julia a slip of paper.

OFFICER MALONE

You're booked. Mrs. Ellen Potsdam. 342 Mc
Clintock Lane. She's expecting you — here. She
has a little boy herself. Not her own, of
course. She's a Granny.

JULIA

I blame leap year.

OFFICER MALONE

Look, I tried, like you asked, but I couldn't find ... I
mean, there wasn't any ... ma'am, there are no
Jews in Visher Ferry.

JULIA
(sarcastic aside)
Oy vey!

OFFICER MALONE
Can I help you with your bags?

JULIA
Come on, Jase, are you finished?
(stretching seductively)
Anywhere, anytime, Officer. We're not fussy.
We're just two lost souls wandering in the desert.

Jason SLURPS twice and scoots out of the booth. Julia leaves two SUBWAY TOKENS for a tip. Officer Malone shakes his head, grabs her suitcases, holds the door and follows them out.

EXT. DINAH'S LANTERN — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

As Julia, Jason and Officer Malone walk down the steps, a bedraggled derelict named SAM (Grandpa on the material plane) approaches. He is drunk and walks stiffly, bearing the shame of frequent soilings.

OFFICER MALONE
Not tonight, Sammy.

SAM
(regards Julia)
"Among all her loves, she had none to comfort
her." [Lam. 1:2]

Officer Malone waves him off.

SAM
But Olly, it's the tourist season!

JULIA
No, wait.

Julia fishes in her purse and hands a bill to Sam. He nods and moves off.

OFFICER MALONE
So you do have a heart, there, young lady?

JULIA
It's my insurance policy with God. I pay the poor
and pray I never descend to that position myself.

Officer Malone nods in approval and walks off.

INT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

WENDY

I didn't know you had a part in it!

GRANDPA

It's my story, ain't it? I can cast just about anyone I want!

WENDY

What about me? I gave you the idea!

GRANDPA

Don't worry, I'll put in a plug for you.

WENDY

(pouting)

You'd think I'd get story credit. Am I the heroine?

GRANDPA

Not yet, but you will be.

WENDY

(brightens)

Really? Who will I be? Can I ride in on a white horse and save everyone?

GRANDPA

No, you'll climb down a ladder straight from the sky and scare the bejesus out of everyone!

WENDY

(bouncing on his lap)

Oh how can I possibly prepare for all the acclaim? Please! Race to the finish!

INT. CADILLAC/NO. ON HWY. 87 — NIGHT

Gloria fusses with the radio. The newscast is drowned out by heavy static. She turns it off. She flips through the maps again but she is too panic stricken to sort them out. She peers into the somber countryside for signs of life.

GLORIA'S POV: a sign materializes — "Old Mill Road: Old Business District: Exit 1/4 mile." She flips on her blinker.

EXT. POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT

A squad car pulls up before a charming home with eye-popping CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS. Officer Malone opens the door for Julia and Jason, then helps them with their bags.

Julia notices the NATIVITY SCENE, ornate and grossly overdone. She bundles up to ward off a sudden chill.

Officer Malone leads Jason to the front door and knocks.

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

ELLEN POTSDAM enters from the kitchen in great agitation, wiping her hands on an apron, which she removes. She inspects the living room one last time. Next to the decorated tree, Ellen's six year-old autistic grandson, ROBBY, stands with his thumb in his mouth, shirttail sticking out.

ELLEN

Not again!

She tucks Robby in, ties his shoes, sets him in a chair before the fire, and hands him a book. More KNOCKS.

She unlocks the latch, but suddenly backs off. The last thing she wants is this unexpected intrusion. Swallowing her fears, she opens the door. Jason, Officer Malone and Julia wait on the stoop.

ELLEN

Enter, enter. Please come in. It's simply freezing out there. Officer Malone, can I get you a cup of hot cocoa on a night such as this?

OFFICER MALONE

Thank you, Ellen, I've got another fifty refugees to place before the night is through.

ELLEN

God bless you, Officer Malone. I'm sorry we only have room for the two.

(to Julia)

Take off your hat and coat, dear. I'll take them for you.

OFFICER MALONE

(tongue in cheek)

We're very grateful for your extreme kindness in opening your home to two lost souls wandering in the desert.

ELLEN

Oh? Young man, can I take your coat? Robby, show them to their rooms. I'm sure they'll want to put on some dry things. Oops, hats off in the house.

Ellen sweeps Jason's YARMULKE off his head and flings it carelessly on the hat rack; heads for the kitchen. Jason suppresses an "ouch." Julia snaps it right back and pats it on Jason's head.

JULIA

(hating this)

This way, Mrs. Potsdam?

OFFICER MALONE

I'll just trot along. Call me if you need me, Ellen.

ELLEN

I always do, Officer Malone. Don't you worry, I can handle these two. There's not a soul in the town's a match for Ellen Potsdam.

Julia doesn't like this pompous ass one bit. She drags off her scarf and leads Jason by the collar. Jason and Robby lock eyes.

JULIA

In here?

ELLEN

(sing song, O.S.)

That's right, dear. Take your little boy with you.
(re-enters)

JULIA

Think I'd leave him on the curb? Oh, I'm sorry, this is Jason, my son. I'm Julia and — is this your little boy?

ELLEN

Heavens, no. This is my grandson, Robert Potsdam. His father, my son Larry, is visiting in-laws for the holidays. Robby's spending Christmas with Grandma this year, aren't you, Robby?

ROBBY

And Grandpa.

ELLEN

(stiffens)

Grandpa had to fix a leak in the hunting lodge. I'm afraid he won't be joining us 'til after New Years. Can I get you a cup of hot cocoa?

JULIA

No thanks, I —

JASON

Can I, Mom?

JULIA

Of course. None for me, thanks. Could I trouble you for some tea, Mrs. Potsdam?

ELLEN

Call me Ellen, won't you, dear? I have coffee, too, if you prefer.

JULIA

Actually the tea, if it's not too much trouble.

ELLEN

A pot of hot water? Trouble? Oh my dear ...

Ellen exits sprightly into the kitchen.

JULIA

(strained)

Can I help you with something?

ELLEN (O.S.)

Don't bother, dear. Just go to your own room. I'll bring you something nice and soothing. Or do you prefer the caffeine?

Ellen's voice trails off. Julia enters her new lodgings pensively.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

JULIA drops her bag and looks around. It's a doll house — lacy curtains, bric-a-brac, hand loomed rug and four poster bed. Pretty, fragile and false.

Julia picks up a porcelain FIGURINE, but when returning it to the glass top of the dresser, it snaps in two. She quickly joins the pieces together, willing them to adhere. And they obey.

Ellen enters carrying a tray, nicely arranged; she leads Jason rather roughly by the shoulder.

ELLEN

You'll probably be more comfortable in here. Do you take milk instead of cream? I've left both. Just knock when you're through with the tray, dear.

Ellen closes the door with the hint of a slam. Jason looks to Julia.

JASON

What did I do?

JULIA

Nothing, probably. What happened out there?

JASON

I was playing with the locks — there's this key in it, the old fashioned kind — and she grabbed it and just pushed me away.

JULIA

How strange. Well, why not spend Christmas Eve with your old lady? Do you mind?

JASON

(sniffing excitement)

No, I don't mind.

JULIA

Get out your book.

Jason throws his bag on the bed and gingerly forages for his book. Julia inspects the milk and cream for freshness.

INT. KITCHEN, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Ellen exhales deeply. She places the KEY, which she has been clutching, into the pocket of her apron. Robby enters.

ELLEN

(whispers)

Robby, don't you ever mention your Grandfather while these people are here, understand? I thought I made that clear. As far as you and I are concerned, Grandpa is dead!

ROBBY

But —

ELLEN

(hisses)

Dead!

ROBBY

Yes, Grandma.

Robby trundles off to the living room, disappointed.

EXT. EXIT RAMP & OLD MILL ROAD — NIGHT

The Cadillac cruises to a stop at a RED STOP SIGN. A beat. Hesitating at first, the car turns right.

INT. CADILLAC/EAST ON OLD MILL RD. — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria strains for signs of life as she cruises past two blocks of abandoned businesses, all boarded up, dark and abandoned, like a ghost town.

EXT. BUSINESS DISTRICT, OLD MILL ROAD — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The Cadillac stops at a FLASHING RED LIGHT, the only sign of life. Pause. The car makes a broad U-turn through the intersection and heads back towards the freeway.

INT. CADILLAC/WEST ON OLD MILL ROAD — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria looks through her maps with increasing alarm. She flips on the overhead.

EXT. ON RAMP & OLD MILL ROAD — NIGHT — A MINUTE LATER

The Cadillac slows at the freeway junction, then begins a left-hand turn, heading south, back to the safety of the city. Suddenly it jerks to a stop.

INT. CADILLAC/ON RAMP — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria jerks around. HER POV: a SMALL FARMHOUSE, with puffing smoke-stack, glows warmly in the distance. A country road, recently ploughed, leads right to it.

Gloria looks before her; then behind. She shifts into reverse.

EXT. ON RAMP & OLD MILL ROAD — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The Cadillac backs up onto Old Mill Road, switches gears and disappears into a black void.

EXT. JOE'S TRAILER — NIGHT

On the edge of town, a LONE TRAILER nestles in a crook of Mother Nature. Every surface glistens with a deep tide of snow. The Lincoln enters in the distance, swaying like a toboggan in the deeply furrowed drive. As it approaches, it swings sharply into a parking space, knocking over a five-foot STATUTE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI. THUNK! Deborah doesn't notice; kills the engine. She tries the cell phone (not working); pulls together her things.

DEBORAH (O.S.)
(muffled)
Shit, shit, shit!

The door opens and Deborah struggles out, heavily laden with sundry valises. She stops before the trailer like a restaurant critic before a greasy spoon. She shakes her head in disgust, pivots and returns to the car.

She unlocks the trunk. Luggage of the highest quality are jammed together, yet meticulously arranged. Deborah grabs one, then another, finally deciding on an overnight bag. She closes the trunk.

Bracing for the worst, she walks to the front door. Just as she is about to knock, the door swings open and JOE MARTIN leans against the frame. He is a handsome, serene man in his mid 30's with dark bedroom eyes. He rubs his bare arms for warmth.

DEBORAH
Oh!

JOE
So you're my little refugee for the night.

DEBORAH
I am nothing of the kind! Young man, I've been sent here under brand of law and I will hold you, the sheriff and your Town Council personally and severally responsible for any and all transgressions on me or my person while staying in this, this questionable abode. Do you have insurance?

JOE

No ma'am, I sure don't. But how about some hot grub?

DEBORAH

Well you are responsible in any case and if there is any hanky panky or threat to me or my person while I stay in this ... this ...

JOE

Abode?

DEBORAH

This poor excuse for a sardine can, my lawyers will sue your little township, town council and every last inhabitant down to their last red cent if it's the last thing I ... I ...

JOE

Been on the road long, ma'am?

Deborah barges her way in the door, pushing Joe aside.

DEBORAH

If I could trouble you for a pot of hot water, I will be happily out of your hair for the rest of this evening!

Amused, Joe watches her disappear inside.

INT. CADILLAC/WEST ON OLD MILL RD. — NIGHT

Gloria steers carefully, brightening with hope. She turns on her right blinker and sweeps onto Diablo Drive, a one lane, recently ploughed, country road.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, DIABLO DRIVE — NIGHT — A MINUTE LATER

A small, inviting farmhouse seems to smile under a friendly white mane. Warmth exudes from behind drawn curtains.

The Cadillac turns carefully into the parking circle — but suddenly plunges into a deep pit: the drainage ditch. A front tire spins helplessly in mid air.

INT. JOE'S TRAILER — NIGHT

Deborah takes three steps and finds herself in the center of Joe's world. She feels boxed in by the tight space. Her worst fears are confirmed: Joe is a

slob.

DEBORAH

Is this ... everything?

JOE

Everything God put on earth for me to enjoy,
ma'am. As you can see, I'm not one of his more
trusted servants.

DEBORAH

Don't speak God to me, boy. I've listened to that
crap my whole life and I don't buy into it. Now,
how about that hot water?

Joe shrugs off Deborah's rudeness and gently shuts the door as he exits into the kitchen. He bangs pots and pans.

JOE (O.S.)

Yes, ma'am; right away, ma'am.

Deborah picks up Joe's underwear with the merest tips of her fingernails and deposits it elsewhere.

She sets down her bag; looks about the room — the puny couch, the half table. She cannot bring herself to sit. Joe enters.

JOE

The water will be a minute. Hey, how 'bout some hot apple cider, fresh meat loaf, mashed potatoes and string beans! I knew you was coming.

DEBORAH

"Were" coming. I was a teacher several lifetimes ago. Oh, my cell phone's dead! Young man, do you have a phone I can borrow? I simply must get a call to my husband — he teaches cadets at West Point. Kick boxing!

Joe gets the message and cups his groin, wincing.

JOE

No ma'am, I sure don't. I don't have much use for people these days. I'll keep the meatloaf in the oven if you change your mind.

DEBORAH

I'm sorry. I thank you for your trouble. It's just I had a client presentation tomorrow — Christmas Eve, I know, but it was special. Of supreme

importance. A lot of people were depending on me. My company's not in such great shape. I'm on pins and needles, I guess. I'm so sorry. Cider, you say?

JOE
(brightening)
I'll be right back.

Joe disappears. Deborah finds the couch relatively clean and sits down. When she realizes the seat next to her may be vacant, she stuffs it with her bag. Joe enters.

JOE
Did I hear you say "your" company. You own a company?

DEBORAH
I'm the CEO. I'm the ... the everything. The father. The mother. The nuts, the bolts. The one who charts the vision, steers the course.

JOE
Hires and fires.

DEBORAH
Something like that. We're not very big, but we've been lucky. Until recently. Thanks to the political situation. You can't pick up a stick around this country without hoards of little Eco Nazi's flitting about. Like bees. That's how I think about them: pesky, stingy, nasty bees!

JOE
Bees make honey if you stay out of their way and talk nice to them.

DEBORAH
Oh! Perhaps I misspoke. Perhaps I'm in Liberal Asshole Land after all. Not another word, I assure you!

JOE
Oh, I like to talk. But I may not always agree.

DEBORAH
Not another word. Not another word. In my circle, we always agree.
(no reaction)
Oh, there I go again. It's almost Christmas

Eve. I'm tired. May I take off my shoes? My feet
are killing me!

JOE
That couch calmed many an anxious heart.

DEBORAH
(tensing; takes up her cider)
It's approximately adequate. Thank you. Ooh,
that's hot. My. Good.

JOE
I hope you don't mind my asking. I just find it
fascinating as the closest I ever got to a —

DEBORAH
(grandly)
An African American?

JOE
— a CEO. Type.

DEBORAH
(disappointed)
Oh. So what do you do? I mean, for a living, of
course.

JOE
I'm an artist. I make masks.

DEBORAH
Masks?

JOE
Clay masks.

DEBORAH
And then what? People wear them? Hang them
someplace?

JOE
No, generally, people take them off.

DEBORAH
Oh, you nail them on a wall, decorate a bookshelf?

JOE
No, ma'am, people don't hang 'em or display 'em
or nothing.

DEBORAH

Well, what the hell do you ... I mean, I'm sorry. Is there any purpose to these ... creations? Who are your customers? Your target audience?

JOE

I don't really target anyone. I sold one to my uncle ten years back. Then he died and I got it back.

DEBORAH

So these masks are yours purely for your personal enjoyment and serve no useful purpose.

JOE

That's the thing about masks, for sure.

DEBORAH

Well isn't that just fine.
(frowns, sips cider)
So you're unemployed?

JOE

No, ma'am, I make masks.

DEBORAH

Young man, you either earn money, make a living selling products or services to other people who buy them, or you are unemployed, are you not?

JOE

I are not.

DEBORAH

(slams down cup)

You're not taking money from the government!
Another able-bodied worker on the dole! A disgrace!

JOE

My Uncle helps me some; and then there's —

DEBORAH

The one who died? I'm having trouble understanding you, young man, but then I'm tired, it's late, and I really ought to be getting some sleep. If they clear the roads early enough, I can still make it.

JOE
(final)
You won't make your meeting.

DEBORAH
(unsettled by Joe's tone)
How do you ... Don't presume to ...
(pause)
Will I be sleeping here?

JOE
No, you can use my bed.

DEBORAH
No, no, I don't want to put you out. This is your home. It's rude of me to inquire. I'm just under so much stress.

JOE
You're not putting me out. We'll both share the bed.

DEBORAH
What did you say? What do you mean, young man?

JOE
(simply)
I thought we could sleep together. I'm very attracted to you.

DEBORAH
This is just great. My husband, Major Dunlop — a/k/a "Steel Heels" — the entire West Point Academy, as well as our darling daughters, two grandchildren and the silent partners in my joint venture will all be thrilled I spent the night with some shiftless, unemployed, mask making, cracker

...
JOE
(hurt)
Masks is a full time job, ma'am!

DEBORAH
Don't' give me that cheap, pseudo-mystical, Gaia land jive! And don't "ma'am" me, young man!

JOE
Don't "young man" me, ma'am!

DEBORAH

I see this conversation is serving no useful purpose, comforting, though, it may be for some, I suppose, so if you'll just excuse me, I'd like to sleep on this couch, thank you very much, and you — what is your name?

JOE

Joe, ma'am.

DEBORAH

And you, "Joe Ma'am," will sleep in your own room with the door locked.

JOE

I meant no offense, ma'am.

Deborah heaves a silent "DUH"? Joe leaves, surprisingly vulnerable, his friendly nature unperturbed.

Deborah gears for war. She opens her bag, yanks things out but cannot undress and winds up tucking everything around her like a barricade.

Joe enters in his underwear and T-shirt.

JOE

Will you be needing dinner, ma'am?

DEBORAH

Meatloaf, you say?

JOE

And taters and beans. I bought a slab of peach cobbler from Dinah's. But if you're not hungry, I'll put it in the frig.

DEBORAH

A little pie might help me sleep. Do you mind?

JOE

If I minded, I wouldn't have asked. I was expecting you. Just let me clean a few dishes.

An ugly vision crosses Deborah's mind. She leaps up.

DEBORAH

No, I'll get it. In the oven, you say?

JOE

Yes, ma'am. You can put the leftovers in the fridge when you're done. Good night, ma'am.

DEBORAH

Excuse me, do you have a robe?

JOE

There's just the one, ma'am, but I'm partial to it.

DEBORAH

Well put it on!

Deborah exits into the kitchen, still visible through a cubbyhole. She rolls up her sleeves and starts cleaning off the countertops, grimacing as she goes.

INT. CADILLAC/PARKING CIRCLE — NIGHT

Gloria TOOTS the horn. No response. TOOTS again.

Gloria flips on the overhead and BUZZES the window down. Her POV: CASCADING CRYSTALS, like prisms, spin rainbows of mystical colors. She BUZZES up the window.

She pulls a flashlight out from the glove compartment, grabs her purse and cane, and kills the engine.

EXT. PARKING CIRCLE, FARMHOUSE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The door opens and Gloria steps out. At nearly 90, she gets on her feet with great difficulty.

She hobbles along the drive through ankle-high snowdrifts. Smoke rises reassuringly from the chimney. She picks up her ancient pace.

At the white picket fence, Gloria notices with dismay a deep snowdrift stretching over the front walk and washing up the front steps.

GLORIA

Hello? Hello! Anybody home? Is anyone there?

A PORCH SWING creaks from its hinges. In the front yard, a BABY WILLOW TREE offers its branches like a friend. Gloria reaches for the tree and wades into the snowdrift.

Slowly, painfully, Gloria advances, knee-deep in snow. Just as she passes the tree, she sinks in a deep recess up to her waist. She screams.

GLORIA (Cont'd)

Help! Oh, please! Can anybody hear me? God help an old woman!

Gloria wrestles in the drift. She yanks a branch of the tree and pulls — SNAP! It breaks off in her hands. She yanks another — SNAP! Another breaks away. Gloria reveals a murderous venom while ripping branch after branch.

GLORIA

Give to me, you little shit!

(to the light behind the curtains)

Someone, please, help me!

EXT. POLICE CAR/BERNICE'S FLAT — NIGHT

The squad car pulls up in front a small, plain, cinder block building. Office Malone steps out briskly.

Archie, a 50-ish businessman with a nasty demeanor, shouts non-stop while Office Malone opens the door, grabs him by the collar and yanks him out of the car.

ARCHIE

I will not spend the night with strangers! I will not leave my van stuck in a snowdrift! I will not sleep on a rug in the lobby of a motel! I will not spend the night in a two-horn brothel! I will not let you handle me this way!

OFFICE MALONE

Button it, fat mouth, or I'll get mad. We don't have five star accommodations in our little neck of the woods, okay? As you see, we're in a bit of a crisis and I've got errands to run.

ARCHIE

But —

OFFICER MALONE

— so why don't you stuff a sock in it, be thankful some Good Samaritan will take your ornery butt in for the night. And be gracious, or your next accommodations will be the hog rendering plant!

ARCHIE

(breaks free)

Jesus, you people got a lot of nerve.

BERNICE, an African American woman in her late forties, withdraws from the window with a frown.

Malone raps on the door, opens it and shoves Archie inside. SLAM!

INT. BERNICE'S FLAT — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Archie stands in the doorway, transfixed. While the cinder block exterior was unbearably plain, the interior is dark, colorful, well-appointed and mysterious, much like a palm reader's den.

Archie is awed. He takes off his hat, overcoat and gloves. He plunks them on a chair. Silence.

ARCHIE

Can't anyone around here give us some heat?

Bernice, an attractive but deeply subdued woman, slips through a door like a shadow. She adjusts the thermostat on the wall slowly, as if unsure of the earth beneath her feet. She tiptoes unsteadily back into the kitchen.

Archie takes a few steps and has pretty much done the tour. He plops down at an old wooden table.

ARCHIE

I don't suppose I can buy a cup of coffee?

A beat. Bernice eases through the door carrying a kettle; she arranges it artfully on a trivet in the center of the table. She sets place mats, silverware and flatware from a sideboard.

ARCHIE

You don't have to go to any trouble ...

Bernice exits. She enters again with a bowl of steaming soup and sets it before him. Archie relaxes and loosens his tie.

BERNICE

Lamb stew. I thought you'd want something. It's free.

She leaves. Archie brightens immeasurably. Bernice reemerges straight away with steaming fresh-baked bread.

ARCHIE

Wow, you really ... I'll pay you for your trouble, of course, you don't have to worry about that.

BERNICE
(expressionless)
I'm not worried.

She exits. Archie smiles at his first slurp of the stew. He digs in ravenously — saws the bread, his fingers dancing off the hot crust. Bernice re-enters with a peach pie and a gallon container of ice cream.

She cuts one quarter of the pie and slides it on a dinner plate; she digs a huge scoop of ice cream.

ARCHIE
Not so fast. I'm not even ...

BERNICE
The pie I made yesterday. It's seconds. Sorry.

She disappears with the desserts like an old domestic. Archie shakes his head laughing.

EXT. FRONT YARD, FARMHOUSE — NIGHT

Gloria can't budge, neither forward nor back. She opens her purse and scrimmages for heavy objects. She finds her GLASS CASE and hurls it; but it is too light and falls short.

GLORIA
I'll pay a reward! Name your price!

Gloria rummages again, removing a large conflagration of KEYS on a heavy ornamental RING. She hurls it with all her force — it cracks the pane with a brittle snap.

INT. LIVING ROOM, FARMHOUSE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

The SOUND OF BREAKING GLASS followed by a dull THUD behind the floor-length curtains. The room is furnished in modest country style with an aura of balance and taste.

A fire blazes in the hearth unattended. A phone RINGS. And RINGS. And RINGS. And RINGS. No one answers.

EXT. FRONT YARD, FARMHOUSE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Gloria hears the last RINGING die and realizes she is quite alone. Only the stripped baby tree seems to sympathize.

Gloria grabs the trunk of the tree with both hands and, with supreme effort, pulls herself onto its little knoll. Together, they are an island in a sea of snow.

INT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

WENDY

I thought this was a Christmas story.

GRANDPA

It is! It is!

WENDY

I didn't know it was going to be sad.

GRANDPA

How can you learn lessons if you can't stand a little pain? Didn't you see Jimmy Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life?" Why, I almost jumped off the bridge with him!

WENDY

Then take out the part about the forest nymph ...

GRANDPA

That's the best part! The whole story hinges on the forest nymph! Whose idea was this anyway? I'm just the storyteller! No tale too tall! Made to order, I might add!

WENDY

(yawns)

Go on. But don't make me frightened, okay?

GRANDPA

Love arrives in many guises.

WENDY

What happens to the little tree?

GRANDPA

I'm getting to that part, but first ...

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT

Before a roaring fireplace, Ellen reads to Robby from a large illustrated book.

ELLEN

"... but there was no room at the Inn. So Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the outskirts of Bethlehem ...

Ellen looks up distracted. A glimmer of compassion melts her rigid countenance.

ROBBY

What is it, Gram?

ELLEN

Oh nothing, dear. I thought it's just silly to make our guests stay in their room. Thought they might like the hearth, the tree and a taste of our Christian hospitality.

ROBBY

Can I show Jason my computer?

ELLEN

(flat)

No.

(recovering)

Not tonight, do you mind? I want to penetrate the meaning of things. Not just the glossy surface. This is a sacred time of year.

Ellen shoves Robby off her lap, wipes her hands on her apron and walks to the guest room door. Just before knocking, she hears something and puts her ear to the door.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia reads a book to Jason while they lean against the headboard.

JULIA

"... and on the first day, we light a candle commemorating the victory of the Maccabees over King Antiochus IV Epiphanies. Did you know they were the first Jews to ...?"

There is a KNOCK at the door.

EXT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Ellen frowns, pulls her hand away from the door. She stands back, wiping her hands nervously on her apron.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia claps Jason's hands together as they sing merrily.

JULIA

... "Hanukkah, Oh Hanukkah
Come light the menorah
Let's have a party,
We'll all dance the hora
Gather round the table,
We'll give you a treat
S'vivon to play with,
Latkes to eat."

There is a SUDDEN LOUD BANG at the door. Julia and Jason stop abruptly; look at each other and giggle guiltily.

JULIA

Who is it?

ELLEN (V.O.)

Open the door, dear; may I have a word?

JULIA

(snide)

All right, but only one.

Jason puts both hands on Julia's mouth as she shrugs helplessly. Jason bounds off the bed and opens the door revealing a livid Ellen.

JULIA

I'm sorry, I was just playing with my son. What is it? Can I help you with something?

Ellen is taken aback from the flushed joy flowing between mother and son. Her anger suddenly feels misplaced.

ELLEN

No. I mean, I was just wondering if you would like to join us in the living room. By the hearth and tree. But it seems as though you don't need anything from us.

JULIA

We'd love to, wouldn't we, Jason?

Jason slips carefully past Ellen, and runs to join Robby.

JULIA

I was just reading ...

ELLEN

So was I. Was that singing I heard in there?

JULIA

It sure was. But I'm afraid I can't carry a tune ...

ELLEN

Nonsense. Everyone takes his tune to the Creator,
on key or off.

Ellen closes the door behind Julia, who puzzles that last remark.

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Jason joins Robby on the floor by the toys. Julia enters and settles
uncomfortably into an over-stuffed chair.

JULIA

Oh, do you mind not closing the door? The room
could stand a blast of this heat.

ELLEN

Of course not, dear.

JULIA

Do you always keep all the doors ... locked?

ELLEN

(sits; changes the subject)

I was just reading to my grandson the story of the
Three Magi who came bearing gifts for the baby
Jesus. They followed a magic star. Would you care
for some fruitcake?

JULIA

Thanks, no. I'm totally off the sugar. For the time
being. Otherwise I'd love to. Really. I'm on
medi-cations, you see.

ELLEN
(frowns)
Medications? For what?

JULIA
I work in a hospital — nights. I'm studying to be a nurse — days. I was a housewife for six years while I had my Jason. Then I got depressed. I'm taking medications to keep my spirits up. Finish school. Be a mother to my son.

ELLEN
My dear, there's nothing a little hard work and prayers to the Almighty can't accomplish.

JULIA
Beg pardon?

ELLEN
Medications. I don't believe in them. People stay on them for years and years. Who has a clue to the long-term effects? Why in my day, nobody was on medications. Ever. We worked!

JULIA
(defensively)
We work, I assure you. I have a full time job. And when I had Jason, I cooked, cleaned and sorted laundry. My husband runs a small advertising firm. It's just that we can't always help the circumstances we find ourselves in. The pain that enters peoples' lives. Anyway, I'm seeing a new therapist. It was his idea.

ELLEN
What you need is a good solid meal, a hot bath, and a strong dose of the love of Jesus.

JULIA
(bolts to her feet)
Oh ... blow it up your ass! Dear!

Even Jason is surprised by this outburst. Robby suppresses a smile; Ellen turns white. Julia recoils sheepishly.

JULIA
I'm sorry. I didn't say he was a good therapist. I'm under a lot of strain. My husband left me. He took off with another woman. Left his little boy. We're on our way to my Aunt Bea's. My

mother lives in Kenya. I'm very upset.

Julia starts to cry, partly because she needs to and partly to diffuse the dangerous anger brewing in Ellen, who sits bolt upright, awaiting God's decision on what to do.

ELLEN

"Wide is the gate and broad the way that leadeth to destruction." [Matt. 7:13]

JULIA

If he didn't love me, I could understand. If he wanted another woman, I would come to deal with it. But our little Jason? His darling boy? How could he leave without a backward glance? The damage he's doing. I see it in his tiny face. And I can't stop it, like a glacier dredging across his body and mind, disfiguring the beautiful landscape.

(Jason crawls behind the couch,
embarrassed)

Oh! These tears are a breakthrough! Dr. Walters will be so pleased.

ELLEN

(measured)

Dr. Walters my eye. Jason, come back here. Come along, dear. What you need is a mother's touch.

Julia looks up surprised. Ellen has completely recovered; found her path. She opens her arms rather mechanically for Julia to enter.

Julia can't believe her luck. She gets up, sits next to Ellen and accepts her enfolding arms.

ELLEN

(a gentle reprove)

"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." [Gen. 49:4] There, there, my dear child. The clouds have shed their rain and the sun begins to shine. Seek the rainbow for the answer lies in their many colors. Why, 'tis the Almighty testing thee on the rocks of thy shore. And when yea finally take the Lord Jesus into thy ...

JULIA

(jumps up again)

Jesus Fucking H. Christ, always with the Jesus! Jesus was a Jew, you bitch! A holy man! Don't you Christians ever stop shoving him

up people's asses! Every time you shove Him up peoples' — the blacks, the Indians — after you've pacified everybody with this, this Jesus DRUG, they find themselves grinding maize for the Jesuits or, or mining gold leaf to decorate the Vatican! Wherever you find menial work performed for next to nothing, you'll find your baby Jesus
 (whining and crying)
 and I, for one, cannot live on minimum wage!

Ellen leaps to her feet.

ELLEN

Get out of my house! How dare you mock our way of life! How dare you insult the name of Christ!

JULIA

I was worshiping with my Jason until you came at our door like a hand grenade! What was that? Are you angry about something? Can't a little religious plurality invade the sanctum sanctorum? God has many colors and speaks many languages, thank you very much! I'm getting my act together and taking it on the road, to the floor of the Comfort Inn — where Yahweh, the Lord of Lords, Holy of Holies, can fucking breathe!

Julia huffs out of the room, pivots at the door, marches back, airlifts Jason and marches into the guestroom, door SLAMMING.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia grabs her suitcase and starts packing.

JASON

Are we leaving?

JULIA

We've been evicted. The baby Jesus is throwing us out in the fucking snow.

JASON

She didn't mean anything.

JULIA

(pivots)

She means everything! Look at me, my son.
 (he does so: frightened, sad)

People like that have put our people, your father, your grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, in torture chambers for what they believed. They sent children by the thousands off to wars.

Inquisitions! Holocausts! All the work of this Baby Jesus. Don't you believe a word of it. It's a trick. A way of gaining control. I don't pretend to know a lot, not nearly enough, but I do know their knowledge is partial. They keep their secrets locked up in little vaults so the masses can't figure out anything for themselves. My darling son, we are out of here! Some day I hope you will under-stand and forgive me this night.

JASON
Can I finish my cocoa first?

Julia throws up her hands in exasperation; regards him critically.

JULIA)
A litigator, I think. Yes, you are definitely courtroom material.
(screams with joy)
Final argument — devastating!
(recovers)
Don't mind me. You choose anything you want to be, okay?. That's just an old lady admiring you ...

Confidence restored, Jason opens the door a crack. Ellen is gone. Robby waves him over. Jason casts a loving smile back at Julia, then exits, closing the door softly behind him. Julia straddles her suitcase, torn.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, DIABLO DRIVE — NIGHT

The storm has subsided; only mild flurries remain. Gloria rests against the spine of the tree; she has made herself comfortable.

An idea occurs and she rummages through her purse, casting aside accoutrements that seem laughable against her dire straits. Finally, she finds it: a CHECKBOOK. She locates a PEN and begins writing.

EXTREME CLOSE on check book — Gloria writing on a check: "To my beloved family. By the time you read this, an old woman will be no more ..."

GLORIA (V.O.)
...be no more. My voice and my hand will be still ...

I, Gloria Hampton, being of sound mind and memory, and not acting under duress of any kind,

since my feet have thankfully turned numb, do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament, and do hereby expressly revoke all former ...

INT. BAR ADJACENT DINAH'S LANTERN — NIGHT

The bar exudes the sad ambience of people having no place to go on Christmas Eve. Some DRUNK CUSTOMERS muster a Christmas carol, but it soon dies out.

Sam walks among the Customers circulating a petition to oust Mayor Tompkins. ED, the kindly barkeep, blocks him with a wry smile and ushers him out the swinging kitchen doors.

Mayor Tompkins enters, goes to the cook's counter and rings a bell. A moment later a white BUTCHER PAPER PACKAGE appears. Mayor Tompkins slips it under his arm and exits.

Next, Carly enters and saunters up to the bar; dumps her huge black handbag on the counter next to BOB, a trucker. He watches her with the keenness of a rising intoxication.

BOB

Hi.

CARLY

Hi yourself.

BOB

Can I buy you a drink?

CARLY

(pulls out a huge wad of bills)

Sure. Club soda. With a twist of lime. Barkeep, can you make some coin?

Ed makes change. Carly walks to a cigarette machine and buys a pack. She returns to the bar.

CARLY

(lights up)

Where's that drink?

BOB

I decided against it.

CARLY

Thanks, prick.

BOB

Prick yourself. But you can buy me one. Are you AA?

CARLY

(exhales deeply)

Macrobiotic. That is, whenever I can get to a kitchen.

BOB

When's that?

CARLY

(confusion borne of drug use)

I think I was 12. Where does a girl go pee around here?

BOB

Why not here? You couldn't look any soddier than you do now.

CARLY

Look, Buddy, what is your hostility trip? What's the problem: no tail lately?

BOB

Damn straight. Not even a little decent company on a deadly Christmas Eve. Ed, get the Martian here a beer.

CARLY

A beer for the Martian lady! Well, that is the best I've been treated all day. I think I'll feel flattered. Yes, barkeep, I'll accept that beer from the earthbound prick.

(Bob waives a white handkerchief)

Okay, truce. I need to slow down anyway. Where's that — oh, thank god.

(grabs it from Ed; chugs it down)

That feels real nice.

BOB

So where were you headed before the sky fell?

CARLY

The Village. For my — I mean my boyfriend's — gig. We're — I mean, he's — a musician. They'll

have to cancel. Good. I didn't want to go anyway. Heavy metal bores me.

BOB

So why go?

CARLY

I wrote a couple songs. Ballads. Mickey promised to break them into his set in Montreal, but he forgot.

BOB

Your boyfriend?

CARLY

Yeah. As in "slip me a ..."

BOB

Sounds like you're tired.

CARLY

You'd better believe it. That kid can go all night! Wears me out totally.

BOB

I didn't mean ... I don't want to hear about your personal life.

CARLY

I didn't mean ... Well, maybe I did. I love to shock people, really I do. Ordinary, uncomplicated, untroubled people. Love to.

BOB

With your scandalous life?

CARLY

Nothing's scandalous anymore. I'm just keeping pace.

BOB

I take my time.

CARLY

I don't want to hear about your personal life.

Both chuckle and chug their beers.

CARLY

Each one gets better, don't it? Hey, barkeep, get me and — what's your name, cowboy?

BOB

Bob. And this is Mr. Ed.

CARLY

Get Bob and — wasn't there a 50's TV series named after — why there's even a resemblance ...

BOB

You're fishing in dangerous waters, young lady.

CARLY

Why? Are you a mad serial killer? I see 'em everyday in the gutters. A sex maniac? I bet I've seen twice as much action in my short lifetime than you have in yours and your being twice my age makes you four times behind. No, you're a good ol' boy, I can tell. Why I even bet you're married. Five little rug rats burning tracks in the carpet? Some little wifey-poo chugging doubles while you race around in your taco wagon trying to stay away?

^ BOB

Awake. I have three children. Three darling, precious little girls, each more beautiful than their mother; and if it weren't for this fucking storm, I'd be holding them in my arms on this cold, dreary Christmas Eve.

Bob starts to cry.

CARLY

Gee, I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to ... I'm such a bitch! I don't want to hurt anybody. I've just grown used to sticking in my skewers before somebody screws, I mean skewers, me. Self defense. You're a nice man. Really, I like you. I was scared. I mean I get scared being offered drinks in strange bars by weird men who are always trying to hit on me.

BOB

(still crying)

I was. I was trying to hit on you.

CARLY

You're kidding? Maybe you could take a class somewhere. Here. Have some Kleenex anyway.

Carly takes some crumpled Kleenex out of her bag and hands it to him.

BOB

What is this? Used?

CARLY

Just a little wrinkled. I'm not too together, that's all. Not the housewife type.

BOB

(blowing his nose)

You talk about yourself as if you were someone else nearby but not quite present.

CARLY

(suspicious)

What do you mean?

BOB

You say something about yourself and then you box it, load it, then haul it away. Cab and rig. Separate.

CARLY

Thank you, Mr. Freud. So where do I go from here — whatever comes out, it's fucked, right?

BOB

No, I was just trying to figure you out.

CARLY

What is this, Truck Stop Therapy?

BOB

Because I wanted to know ... how to talk to you.

CARLY

Why?

BOB

So I'd know what to say to you.

CARLY

(tender)

What do you want to say to me?

BOB

Will you hold me tonight?

CARLY

Is that all?

BOB

I'd settle for just that ... of course, this being the Christmas season and if you were in the spirit of giving ...

CARLY

I like you. I'd love to. But I can't.

BOB

Why?

CARLY

Why? Why? Why? Because I need my old man.

BOB

I'm an old man.

CARLY

(smiles)

I bet you're not. Anyway, Mickey is expecting me. In fact, I think I'd better go find him. Thanks for the beer. And the company. You'll feel better when you're home.

BOB

Thanks. You're probably right. It's tonight I'm worried about.

CARLY

(sad)

Sorry. Bye.

She exits. At the end of the bar, BLYTHE, a 50-ish old maid, dressed like an American Bandstand contestant, sits alone. She pulls her curls forlornly. Bob draws deeply from his stein and saunters unsteadily over.

EXT. VILLAGE SQUARE — NIGHT

A six-foot statue of the BLESSED MARY protects the Village Square. She has seen better days: fingers worn off, pock marks here and there, sadly neg-lected. Discarded SODA and CANDY WRAPPERS peek from beneath the ice and snow.

Sam enters, lays a steaming PLATE OF FOOD at her feet and lights a CANDLE IN A STYROFOAM CUP. He kneels before her.

SAM

Not to worry. Ed always comes through.

(tugs at trash stuck in ice)

Look at this crap. When I was young, they still swept the streets! Remember how it looked? Before they started building things ...

EXT. PRIMEVAL MEADOW IN LATE SPRING — DAY

In Sam's fantasy, a lush, vibrant meadow dazzles with super-abundant plant and wildlife. A GIGANTIC SUN, like a giant rose, floods the sky, unfolding its petals in sparks of gold. YOUNG SAM, a tall, lithe man in his late 20's, walks serenely through the meadow.

EXT. VILLAGE SQUARE — NIGHT

Reluctantly, Sam returns to his senses.

SAM

I'm sorry. For all this. For thinking without heart. Building without beauty. Always dumping the future onto someone's lap. Look at this crap!

(finds Her gaze)

Come on. There's work to do.

He gets up and walks off.

INT. AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — NIGHT

There is a KNOCK at the door. AVA MARSHALL, a dark, voluptuous, 47 year-old who has lent her every talent to the art of seduction, answers the door in a silky, glittering robe.

Officer Malone takes off his hat, smiling with a mixture of boyish charm and devilish delight. Ava rocks against the door sympathetically, reading his body through and through.

OFFICER MALONE

Evening, Miss Marshall.

AVA

Evening, Officer Malone.

OFFICER MALONE

Just thought I'd come by and see if your situation
has improved.

AVA

I told you, Officer Malone, there's simply no room
at the Inn.

OFFICER MALONE

So your sister's not staying after all? I didn't see
her car.

AVA

Oh, she came in on the bus.

OFFICER MALONE

Then there's no room, I see.

AVA

No room at all.

Ava's octogenarian next-door neighbors, MR. AND MRS. MARKLE, scuttle down their front steps and walk to the car. There is little privacy between these townhouse units.

MRS. MARKLE

Hello, Ava dear.

AVA

Hello, Mrs. Markle.

MR. MARKLE

(not all with us)

Fine weather we're having.

AVA

Delightful. If I don't see you, have a wonderful
holiday.

MR. & MRS. MARKLE

Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas.

AVA & OFFICER MALONE

Bye, bye. Bye, bye.

Ava nods to Malone as if to say, "Coast is clear; your move."

AVA

There's only my bed ... and we two.

OFFICER MALONE
So your sister is home?

AVA
She took a walk.

OFFICER MALONE
A very long walk?

AVA
Yes, but I expect her back in about an hour. Yes,
say about ten. I left a key on the back stoop under
the milk bottle.

OFFICER MALONE
Milk?

AVA
We go through so much of it. Does a body good.

OFFICER MALONE
(aw shucks)
Ma'am, I'm powerful glad your sister keep you
company on a cold night such as this, it being
Christmas.

AVA
We're gonna light a fire, toast marshmallows, dip
them in some cherry rum and stick them on our
summits.
(low, tone-deaf singing)
"Climb every mountain?"

OFFICER MALONE
And lick the platter clean.

AVA
The key. The milk bottle. At ten.

Ava quickly shuts the door, letting the pressure build.

INT. HALL, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — NIGHT — LATER THAT EVENING

A blank, typical prefab door. Behind it, SOUNDS of Officer Malone's and
Ava's bumping and grinding. While we're not sure what's going on, but it
sure sounds athletic.

AVA
(high pitched yodeling)
Yip, yip, yippee tee-eye-oh —

Light, crisp SPANKING SOUNDS are heard. Officer Malone rides the bucking bronco, the lone star of the rodeo.

INT. FOYER, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — NIGHT — MINUTES LATER

Officer Malone walks somewhat stiffly to the front door, while Ava trails behind, proudly surveying her handiwork. She leans against the door, heaving her profile as if to leave one last dinner mint.

OFFICER MALONE
I sure hope you find your sister, ma'am.

AVA
We're so close.

OFFICER MALONE
(returns key)
You best keep that handy. Case she needs it. You never know when a prowler might strike.

AVA
How well I know it, Officer Malone.

OFFICER MALONE
Good night, Av- ... I mean, Miss Marshall.

AVA
Good night, sis- I mean Officer Malone.

Ava closes the door behind him.

EXT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

WENDY
What kind of whorehouse are you running here?

GRANDPA
Ava is a woman of the world, trapped in a time-share.

WENDY
Rum roasted marshmallows?

GRANDPA

Never underestimate the wiles of a political woman.

WENDY

Mrs. Fields would puke!

GRANDPA

Now, you're too young for this sort of thing. Let's see what the others are up to ...

EXT. FARMHOUSE, DIABLO DRIVE — NIGHT

Gloria is writing hurriedly. DOZENS OF CHECKS lie about her on the snow.

GLORIA

... Sixth. A special word to my youngest son, Dexter. I will try to say what I couldn't find the courage to say in person. What I left poor Sid to butcher and mangle. May he and you forgive me.

I'll only say that I thought you, a single, prosperous man, wedded, in faith, to another single, prosperous man, had no need of the effects of my estate. Your brothers and sisters and their children seemed still, so, to be struggling. I have a weakness for children, as I am one myself.

My intent was not to disown you in any way, though you, in your haste, managed to disown me. And so I must repair the damage I have done.

I hereby bequeath to you, Dexter, all my estate, all real property and effects. I leave it to your unwavering honesty and magnificent imagination to divide it equally among your siblings, as you see fit.

I must confess I did not think your life, a gay man's life, had much significance. But when you fell ill and I witnessed, from afar, your brave march up the road to Calvary, not only bearing your own cross, a vicious deadly disease, borne with a brave heart and calm mind, but also assisting others through their gravest passage. Despite what I, and others in my circle, might otherwise proclaim, could not find in our hearts to do ... Dexter, my darling, I know now God judges you favorably. Did I say how proud of you I am?

Through your entire childhood, somewhere, in a secret space I call my soul, I knew you were suffering. And I cried along with you. I tried to patch it up with bonnets, goodies, nannies and the finest education that money could buy. And yet, my heart, not knowing what you wanted, not waiting ever, or understanding you on your terms.

But no, you rebelled. Well, and well done.

The ink stops flowing from the PEN, which has frozen solid. The TREE waves like a baby ghost.

Gloria tosses the empty check case away. She collects the LOOSE CHECKS and pins them to her coat, like a schoolgirl bearing notes from her mother.

GLORIA (Cont'd)

Here. Near my heart. That's what I'll be wearing when they find me. Debts of love for my darling children.

(blows her nose; wipes tears)

I'm not afraid. It was always easier not to feel. There isn't much in these old bones left to ponder. I'll be with you on the other side, my children. Look for me there, my dearest darlings.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE (DEXTER HAMPTON) — EARLY A.M.

257 Abbey Place is a small, quaint church remodeled to suit the piquant tastes of brilliant New York architect, DEXTER HAMPTON. A corner of the master bedroom, formerly a choir loft, has been transformed, yet again, into a hospital room. BLEEPING from a shelf near the bed are sundry ELEC-TRONIC MEDICAL EQUIPMENT, most of which are connected to Dexter.

Dexter, dressed in a hospital gown and propped in bed, channel surfs the TV, settling in on a soap opera.

HAL, his partner, enters, carrying a breakfast tray, and sets it across Dexter's lap. He arranges a tiny vase of flowers on it. Dexter frowns. Hal removes the flowers. Dexter plops a finger in the cereal.

DEXTER

(sing song)

It's cold.

HAL

I just took it off the fire.

DEXTER

Maybe it lost something in the three hours it took
to perk the coffee?

Hal obediently removes the tray. Hal is the tall, bearish managing partner of a small litigation law firm. He is kind and loyal, and he puts everyone else's needs before his own. Except, however, during reckless sexual escapades where he attempts to gain it all back.

HAL

Look, I didn't sign on as Chief Cook and Bottle
Washer.

DEXTER

And I suppose I did? Look, if you're not happy,
why don't you just pack your bags and ...

HAL

(exiting)

Don't tempt me.

DEXTER

(calling him back)

On second thought, I'm burning up in here. The
chill will be refreshing. I'll commune with the
element of ice. Bring it back. Please?

Hal shakes his head and returns the tray. He takes the remote control and turns off the TV. Dexter lunges for it wildly.

DEXTER

Put that back on. Joan's back from Cabo Cabo with
her new beau, Brack!

HAL

You're sick, you know that?

DEXTER

Just plug in another machine, I'll be fine.

HAL

Oh ...

DEXTER

Did you see the dress she's wearing? Straight from
the back rack of Penney's with florals conceived at
a Grateful Dead concert!

Hal

Penney who?

DEXTER
(exasperated)

Joan! My Joan! Barracuda Joan! Who is her hair stylist these days. She's traipsing around Dallas like she just crawled out of bed with an ax murderer!

HAL
(firm)
I'm turning this off.

He does so. Dexter succumbs like a bad child. Hal sits on the bed, pulls out a stack of PHONE MESSAGES and gives half to Dexter.

HAL
These soap operas are doing you no good at all. You pine for all the hot men and when the women snag them, you wig out completely.

DEXTER
I'm learning their tricks, you see. The fine art of the bear trap! I hate all women, it's true. I suppose that's because I feel like one.
(waves messages)
This is just so impossible without a secretary!

HAL
(reads one)
Terry can't find the Wilbur file.

DEXTER
(exasperated)
It's on the credenza in the library. I told him on my last day. He's got my Sharon, what more does he want?

HAL
Terry's a fine architect; Sharon's a great secretary. They'll do fine.

DEXTER
Terry will lose the Wilbur account. He doesn't know how to kiss ass, not like I do, don't I darling?

HAL
All those years, having Terry for a partner? Count your blessings.
(reads message)
The Gay Republicans?

DEXTER
(exasperated)
What do they want? Can't they see I'm dying?

HAL
(reads)
"Do you want to name us in your Will?"

DEXTER
Tell them I resigned ... on account of cluelessness.
(hands one to Hal)
Now, here's one for the new cook — Helga's her
name? — "Dear Helga, you're fired!"

HAL
Not again!

DEXTER
(whips out a tin can)
She actually brought me my consommé — in a
can?

HAL
That does it. I'm doing the shopping.

DEXTER
No, Hal, please, really, you're the love of my life,
but find another cook and let her do it. You're a
brilliant litigator, but you dress my haute cuisine
like it's some wild Fairie party buzzing to Alcatraz —
on a barge!

HAL
You've fired three cooks in two months. Who am I
gonna hire in a town this size? Give me something
to work with here.

DEXTER
I can't help it the doctor has me on so many pills,
the do's and don'ts of which must be managed by a
full-time pharmacologist.

HAL
I'll post another note at Dinah's. I don't know what
else to do.

DEXTER
(sing song)
"Dinah's Lantern, Gourmet School of Fine Cuisine."

HAL
Their food's not so bad.

DEXTER
(exasperated)
You say that to me, after all the treats I make for you.

HAL
I'm turning into a blimp.

DEXTER
(smiling)
My blimp. Look, darling, it's Christmas Eve. Why don't I make the Christmas dinner ... by proxy ... through you!

HAL
I'd rather hang by my thumbs.

DEXTER
(patting playfully)
It'll be fun. I have all my mother's recipes, service for half the Red —

Hal is distracted by a SQUAD CAR pulling up the drive.

DEXTER (Cont'd)
— well, speak of the devil, my very own kissin' cousin. Get that, love, won't you?

Hal exits.

EXT. 257 ABBEY PLACE — EARLY A.M. — CONTINUOUS

Officer Malone drags out of his squad car and lumbers unhappily up the church steps. He notices a recess in the exterior wall with a STATUE OF JESUS CHRIST sporting a LEATHER GOLF BAG over its head. Before Malone can rap the brass plate, Hal opens the door.

HAL
He saw you pull up.

Officer Malone needs no introduction. He pats Hal in the belly as he passes.

OFFICER MALONE
Better lose that.

HAL
I'm off the wagon since ...

OFFICER MALONE (O.S.)
(already inside)
I know, I know.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — EARLY A.M. — CONTINUOUS

Officer Malone walks through the former church commons, now stripped of everything except the hardwood floor and sundry gymnastic equipment — parallel bars, trampolines, bench presses, basketball hoops, rings dangling from the ceiling, et al. Malone shakes his head.

Malone stops before a huge, wall-to-wall TROPHY CASE displaying a YOUNG ARCHITECTS AWARD from the AIA and a BRONZE PLAQUE awarded by the NEW YORK GAY GAMES. A PHOTO depicts Dexter standing proudly in his tracksuit, plaque in hand, next to his wheelchair-bound father who, in the last stages of Alzheimer's, scowls at the camera.

HAL
In Dexter's world, size matters.

Malone shakes his head again and disappears up the steps.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — EARLY A.M. — CONTINUOUS

Officer Malone enters, followed by Hal.

DEXTER
(patting childishly)
My dear cousin, Officer Malone! How kind of you to pay my love and me a call!

OFFICER MALONE
Can it, Dexter. You know I hate that queer crap.

DEXTER
Why, you old reactionary. How far you've come since we swung from the vines and splashed together naked in the Mohawk!

Officer Malone sits on the edge of the bed, stone serious. He takes Dexter's chin in his hand.

OFFICER MALONE
You look like shit.

Dexter deflates; seems to age ten years. Malone feels his forehead and critically examines all the medical apparatus keeping his cousin alive.

DEXTER
How sweet.
(a tear slips out; he whispers)
I feel like shit. There's not much time.

Officer Malone hands the breakfast tray to Hal, then extends his arms. Dexter blurts out crying and buries himself in his cousin's lap. Hal leaves.

INT. KITCHEN, 257 ABBEY PLACE — HALF HOUR LATER

Officer Malone twirls a spoon in a coffee mug while Hal returns the cream to the refrigerator.

OFFICER MALONE
What will you do?

HAL
What? When he's gone?

OFFICER MALONE
Will you sell the place? Move your parents in? It must be tough, doing double duty.

HAL
Mom and Dad are finally comfortable; don't want to rock the boat. And I like it here, though Dexter's hand is everywhere.

OFFICER MALONE
You could never forget.

HAL
I don't want to forget.

OFFICER MALONE
I meant the pain. To love again, you'll have to forget. Where's Helen?

HAL
Her folks took her in. Somewhere off the coast of Maine. Won't answer my ...

OFFICER MALONE
Goddamn AIDS.

HAL
I can't figure it out. Helen's ill. Dexter's ill. I passed it to her to him. Why aren't I dying? It's ripping me apart to know I'm responsible for two deaths.

OFFICER MALONE
It's a virus. You loved Helen.

HAL
I don't understand how it could just skip a link. Crush my lovers on either side while I stand here, naked, like a some serial killer.

OFFICER MALONE
Helen had other lovers. So did you. You had an open marriage.

HAL
We betrayed each other. Cut the "secular humanist" crap.

OFFICER MALONE
Look, I came here to ask a favor.

HAL
What? Sure. Of course.

OFFICER MALONE
Another storm is brewing. People are pouring in by the busloads. All my good Samaritans are hun-kered in. Dinah's is jammed and I need a place to feed the contingency camping out in the motel lobby. I thought I'd bring them here for a holiday meal. Downstairs. In the commons. The timing couldn't be worse, I know, but we're in a crisis. Will Dexter mind?

HAL
(not liking this)
The timing couldn't be worse. And no, I don't know his mind. Who does? I'll ask. That's all I can do.

OFFICER MALONE
Fair enough.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — MINUTES LATER

Dexter SHRIEKS while throwing EATING UTENSILS one by one across the room. Hal ducks each missile; rises, then ducks another.

DEXTER

Open my home to a bunch of fucking breeders?
(PLUNK)
Disturb a dying man to feed a hoary mass?
(CLANG)

HAL

You said you loved the soap operas.

DEXTER

(moving on to medical supplies)
Never in my wildest vision could I foresee my very
own cousin, standing before me on a pretext of
brotherly love and familial affection, turn my
deathbed into a fucking smorgasbord!
(THUNK)

HAL

It's only a few short hours.

DEXTER

In a few short hours, my parents threw me out of
the house when they learned I was gay. In a few
short hours, I was fired from my job when
diagnosed HIV. In a few short hours, I gave you
my body and my soul and your tiny little fluids
turned into microbial piranhas chewing their way
back to Botswana! In a few short hours, I will
leave this horrid place, this entire searing
experience brazed into every crevice of my fucking
being! So fuck 'em! Let them all jump up Dinah's
ass and lick the platter clean!

HAL

(moving)

It's time for your medications.

(nope: THWANG)

DEXTER

In a few short hours, my mother's attorney,
Suck-Em Dry Sidley, explains why I'm cut out of
my mother's Will and why I cannot be her son
anymore! Oh no, not this time! In my home, in
my time — these last few hours will be mine! Mine,
mine, MINE!

There goes the BEDPAN; Hal catches it (empty — whew!).

HAL
(coaxing)
What ... the oyster-sage stuffing?

Fully vented, Dexter warms to a creative project.

DEXTER
It's apples and raisings for this crew! We can serve from the balance bar. The folding chair's are in the shed. Oh, ask Jack to lend us some plywood. Tablecloths, hmm — oh I know, I can sew patterns on my new linens! Let's see, we'll multiply my recipes in batches of ...

HAL
(that's his Dexter)
Yes, dear.

Hal exits.

INT. JOE'S TRAILER — MORNING

Deborah inspects the BOOKS and NATIVE AMERICAN ARTIFACTS over Joe's desk. This triggers something for her; she throws on a sweater and dashes out the front door.

Minutes Later. Deborah sits squarely on the couch. A lavish, executive "PORT-A-DESK" — the latest silly office craze — stretches across her lap. She sports a HEADSET.

DEBORAH
(grandstanding)
... oh, and Robin, will you hold my calls for the rest of the morning?
(shivers with her power)

Joe enters carrying two heavy grocery bags and lets the door slam. Deborah makes a move to help.

JOE
Don't get up.
(Deborah resumes)
What's that you're doing?

DEBORAH

I'm putting the finishing touches on my presentation.

JOE (O.S.)

Presenting what to whom?

DEBORAH

You certainly get to the point. I'm trying to convince a cadre of investors to finance a ski resort my company wants to build.

JOE

So you're in real estate.

DEBORAH

Tangentially, yes.

JOE

Where's this resort going to be?

DEBORAH

Reed River Flow. Near the reserve.

JOE

Bad location. The ground is soft and marshy; it filters the stream coming off the hills before drain-ing in the lake. The town has a population of 63. What do they need a resort for?

DEBORAH

(cannot suppress her excitement)

For the 842 new employees servicing the 26,450 time-share vacationers expected each year.

Construction breaks ground, I believe —

(checks notes)

— in 18 months. 122 units at \$1.36 per square foot, let's see, that's ...

JOE

That's a lot of traffic for a soft shoulder. It's a crying shoulder, you know that? So you're an architect?

DEBORAH

Development. A subsidiary of a subsidiary of a Fortune 500 company I can't name is paying me to build it, and build it I shall.

JOE

What if they don't need it? What if they can meet all their needs in Saratoga Springs, one hour up the road?

DEBORAH

Is the kettle still warm?

JOE

I said, "What if they don't ..."

He exits to the kitchen.

DEBORAH

I heard what you said. Don't bother with the kettle. I'm not thirsty anyway.

Joe bothers. Deborah erupts with another shiver. She furtively reaches in a drawer, removes a toy-sized FEATHER DUSTER, sweeps the surface clean and returns it.

Joe enters with a cup of hot water.

JOE

Reed River needs a Mayor with an eye for beauty, not some gas guzzling Hoosier with his head stuck in the corporate trough.

DEBORAH

Young man!

JOE

Old biddy!

DEBORAH

Well!

JOE

Don't worry. I still want to sleep with you.

He leaves.

DEBORAH

I wasn't worried! Not in the least! Outrageous!

Joe enters and sits on the couch dangerously close to Deborah: he is as loose and un-presupposing as a puppy.

JOE

But don't you think there is a moral point here? I mean Reed River is a mossy ground caught between the foothills and the lake. It's a rainy, swampy, humid bog. It's a paradise for mosqui-toes and tadpoles, but it really is too soft, spongy, bumpy, and, well, why do you want to introduce something hard and evil into such a delicate, marshy place?

DEBORAH

(fighting her arousal)

A resort, young man, is not a —

JOE

Don't patronize me, ma'am, with the "young man" if you please.

DEBORAH

— "thing of evil." People have needs. They buy things. Like vacations! First we work them to the bone, then we sell them bottomless vacations! It's really very simple.

JOE

You'll have to drain the water table to make the earth firm enough to lay a foundation. You'll wipe out the insects, then the water beetles, then you'll drive away the winged creatures.

DEBORAH

The human population in the next ten years will exceed nearly eight billion. I am merely planning ahead...

JOE

You're raping a thing of beauty.

DEBORAH

Young ma-... Joe! We're from different worlds. We really cannot see the other's point of view.

JOE

I know that. I really, really know that. But I'm trying ... and I think you should be trying a little too.

DEBORAH

Enough of this Eco crybaby crap, okay? I get this from the county planners; I get this from the EPA - no matter who we appoint; I even get it from Robin. Actually, I'm thinking of letting her go.

JOE

So you do fire people.

DEBORAH

I fire anyone who stands in my way.

JOE

I fire passions. I want everyone in my way.

DEBORAH

That's it. I'm outta here.

With brutal strength, Deborah heaves Joe off her, but he curls in her arms like a puppy and kisses her on her cheek, neck, ears. Much too fossilized over the years, Deborah can only slide in one direction: she quickly melts beneath him.

INT. BERNICE'S FLAT — MORNING

Archie is stuffed to the gills. He leans back in his chair barking into his CELL PHONE.

ARCHIE

Yes, move the spuds out of the bin, load them on a truck and get them the hell to Spicey Burger's before they rot! And take some ketchups too. I don't know, try six gross. Well, stuff 'em up their ass! Now the fruit cocktail goes to Vinny's. The purchase order's all set, don't take anything back. You'll have to stand in for me 'til I can get the hell out of here. I don't know. Tomorrow if I'm lucky.

(fondles his pie with a fork)

Well, maybe after the weekend. I need a break anyway. It's Christmas after all. Okay. I'll leave the cell on.

Archie hangs up the phone. He looks eagerly around the room for more offerings. He redials the phone.

ARCHIE

Is that Ricky? Hiya son, Merry Christmas, almost. It's Daddy. You don't say? What's that

barking? Well let go of her tail! Put your mother on the line, will you? Hello, Gladys? Yeah, I thought so too, but this weather's just terrible. It's a countywide crisis. Have Ricky let go of her tail. I know, I'll miss you too, but what can I do? I don't know, some fleabag motel, I didn't even catch the — Ricky, the tail. No, don't trust their switchboard — use the... Betty and George, really? Well, George is bucking for my spot on the board, so don't get too cozy. Yes, golfing is fine but for god's sake stay out of the bar! Keep my present on ice.

(shouts)

Ricky, let go the goddamn dog!

Archie hangs up. Bernice enters, dressed in A WHITE NURSE'S UNIFORM, two sizes too small.

ARCHIE

You're not going out, are you?

BERNICE

They need me at the hospital. To process the new arrivals. It won't take long.

ARCHIE

You don't think the roads are open?

BERNICE

I've got to try. Will you be comfortable? Do you have everything you need? I'll be back in a few hours.

ARCHIE

(disappointed)

Happy trails, then.

Bernice slips out the front door, ever measured, monotone and mysterious.

EXT. JACK'S ONE-STOP PALACE — AFTERNOON — HOURS LATER

Snow flurries stir the sky. Bernice pulls her pick-up truck into the parking space of the convenience store and brakes. She climbs out, slams the door, and exits into the store.

INT. JACK'S ONE-STOP PALACE — AFTERNOON — MINUTES LATER

JACK, a withered old man, sizes up Bernice skeptically while adding up her purchases on a credit log. He loads her shopping bag.

JACK

We got specials today, Bernice — tractor retreads
and coudé catheters. What'll it be?

BERNICE

(inspects spooled rope)

How strong is this?

JACK

It's twisted Nylon. Hold half a ton. Real heavy
duty. Say, Wendell is looking for you, you
know. Says you ain't picked up your medications
all week. Remember the last time you forgot your
Thorazine, why half the county —

BERNICE

I'll take it.

Bernice sweeps up her bag and exits.

EXT. JACK'S ONE-STOP PALACE — AFTERNOON — CONTINUOUS

The passenger door opens and Bernice shoves the bag inside. She walks around the front of the cab and climbs in. She inhales deeply.

She reaches into her coat and pulls out a crumpled BROWN ENVELOPE. She opens the flap and draws out a jumble of NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS: photos of men in white hooded garments riding horses, making nooses or speaking from lecterns in the middle of the forest in the dead of night.

EXTREME CLOSE of Bernice settling in on one particular PHOTO: Archie — in a white KKK robe, hood off, caught off guard, tying a hangman's noose — smiling archly at the camera.

Bernice shoves the photos back into the envelope and locks them in the glove compartment. She exhales painfully.

INT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

Grandpa notices Wendy sleeping. He places the book over her face to shield her eyes.

GRANDPA

It's best not to hear the next part, love. It's best
not to know too soon the darkness within the
human heart. For it's a mystery formed in the
secret recesses of ...

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — AFTERNOON

Jason reads to Robby from an ILLUSTRATED BOOK, but Robby squirms distractedly.

JASON

What is it?

Robby slowly drags Ellen's APRON from the far side of the couch. He reaches into the pocket and withdraws a KEY. He squirms again, trying to communi-cate something.

JASON

A key. To a lock. On a door. That leads to ... unsolved mysteries!

Robby puts a finger to his lips. He hops off the couch and heads down the hallway.

INT. HALLWAY, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — CONTINUOUS

Robby stops at a door just before the kitchen. He fits the key into the lock. It CLICKS. Robby turns the lock and opens the door, but backs against the wall in terror.

Jason looks to Robby for permission and, finding no objection, steps through the door and down the staircase. Robby sticks his thumb in his mouth and begins sucking.

INT. HALL, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — AFTERNOON

Officer Malone's GROANS permeate the prefab door. The entire panel seems to expand like a lung.

INT. FOYER, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — AFTERNOON — LATER

Officer Malone sways unsteadily to the front door. Ava sashays behind, a little worse for wear.

OFFICER MALONE

Why, Miss Marshall, ma'am?

AVA

Why, Officer Malone, you needn't even ask. The key. The milk bottle.

(feigns admiration)
Not tonight?

OFFICER MALONE
You're an inspiration to the whole community,
ma'am.

Officer lugs heavily down the stairs and slips on the ice. He reels, snatching the railing to save his fall. He turns around, sheepish, and the wind blows off his hat. The impish smile is back.

OFFICER MALONE
Shit, ma'am.

AVA
It happens.

EXT. SQUAD CAR/DINAH'S LANTERN — LATER THAT NIGHT

Officer Malone is midway through a box of donuts. He slurps a large coffee in a paper container. He stares with a heavy gaze.

Mayor Tompkins pulls up in his Mercedes and brakes. He sidles around the car and leans insinuatingly against the door. Reluctantly, Malone rolls down his window, his dislike permeating the professional demeanor.

OFFICER MALONE
Evening, Ernie.

MAYOR TOMPKINS
Evening, Olly. Everything under control?

OFFICER MALONE
For five minutes at least.

MAYOR TOMPKINS
Say, I thought we had a talk about the situation over at Abbey Place. I know he's your cousin and all, but hell, it's a church, you see? And this is a good, God-fearing town. Now I've got half the state popping around, sticking their noses in all the nooks and crannies and I don't want a stink. Understand?

OFFICER MALONE
Look, Ernie...

MAYOR TOMPKINS

Now you look, old buddy. We had this out last summer. I thought we had an understanding. By Halloween, they're gone — with all the other freaks. I'm Mayor of this town and I intend to keep it decent.

OFFICER MALONE

Look, he's my cousin. What'll I say? What'll my whole family say? Besides, I can't run them out. On what charge?

MAYOR TOMPKINS

We're not zoned for fags, okay? How the hell should I know? Be creative!

From his coat he withdraws a large BROWN ENVELOPE.

MAYO TOMPKINS (Cont'd)

Look, I brought you a little present. Something I want you to look at long and hard. Just something to take into consideration. Show the depth of my sincerity.

Malone regards it suspiciously. Mayor Tompkins presses it into his hands.

MAYOR BOMPKINS (Cont'd)

By the way, I've supped at that trough myself.
(taps on the hood)
Over and out.

MALONE

Yes, sir.

Mayor Tompkins gets into his car and drives off. A beat. Malone breaks the seal and draws out several BLACK & WHITE POLAROIDS of he and Ava in compromising positions, apparently shot from the bedroom window.

Malone slides them slowly back into the envelope and rubs his face, more tired than surprised.

INT. JOE'S TRAILER — NIGHT

It is dark inside, so dark that only the glint on the wallpaper shimmers with primeval shapes of mushrooms and creeping vines. We hear labored breathing.

DEBORAH

Oh my God, what have I done?

JOE

Don't take all the credit.

DEBORAH

I'm married. I have three children, two
grand-children. Next week I'm having lunch with
Clarence Thomas.

JOE

Don't speak.

DEBORAH

What will my secretary think?

JOE

Give her a holiday. Ssssh! Just listen to the
void. How far does it reach? Where are the
boundaries? We're at the center of everything.
Silence calls. Is it death?

DEBORAH

Oh please, let me go.

JOE

Your old life has died. A new life begins.

DEBORAH

Not with you. Not in this ...

JOE

Yes, in this ...

DEBORAH

Car wreck? Oh!

JOE

Silence. Where all your fears are buried. Where all
that's between you and the life you really crave ...

DEBORAH

Okay, everybody off!

With immense power, Deborah airlifts Joe off her body and starts to dress.

DEBORAH

Show's over. The party's ended. Cinderella's back from the ball. Where's my goddamn slippers!

JOE

You're upset.

Deborah heaves another "DUH"! Joe recoils, hurt, but still lazy and playful. He lays his head in his hands and admires Deborah's legs.

DEBORAH

... That's right. The Titanic has risen. Scarlett's found another day. Mt. Vesuvius needs a cork.

Joe takes the FEATHER DUSTER from the port-a-desk and begins dusting Deborah's thighs.

JOE

Mr. Reagan wants another bowl of popcorn.

Deborah suddenly straddles Joe and forces her uterus over his erection. He winces with pain; then gets comfortable; then begins palming her breasts, navigating her.

EXT. POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT

Hugging her shawl, Ellen hurries up the drive. She marches up the stairs and enters the house.

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RES. — NIGHT — CONT.

Ellen enters, relieved to find the guest door closed. She stops dead when she sees Robby standing in the hallway, the basement door ajar. Robby backs into the pantry, afraid.

ELLEN

Robby! Robby, who's in there!

(screams)

Jason!

Julia, strung out from a nap, feebly opens the door and sticks her head out.

JULIA

What's wrong?

ELLEN

Where's Jason?

JULIA
In the living room finishing his ...

Julia sees the empty room. Before she can retract, Ellen stuffs her back inside, slams the door and locks it with a key.

ELLEN
You stay there.

JULIA (O.S.)
What? How dare you!

Ellen races to the basement door and, suddenly slowing down, as if wading under water, descends the staircase.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia shakes the knob and kicks the door; paces the room.

JULIA
Fascists! Bloody fascists! Jason?
Jesus H. —

She kicks the CLOSET DOOR, which ricochets against the door catch revealing a life-size CRUCIFIX with a BLOODY JESUS staring her in the face! She screams.

INT. SQUAD CAR/MC CLINTOCK — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

JULIA'S SCREAMS grab Officer Malone's attention a block away. He flashes the lights and turns toward the sound while rolling down the window for clarity.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia storms about the room. She notices the window and flings the curtains aside. She flips the lock but the window is iced shut. She rattles it and pounds savagely. SOUNDS of ice splintering; glass breaking. The window yields grudgingly. Julia climbs out into the night air.

INT. POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia dangles from the window, then falls, cushioned by a snowy hedge. She dusts herself and runs to the front of the house. Office Malone's squad car swings up front and stops. Julia pivots and creeps to the back of the house.

She notices a small basement window, smoky from frost and dust. She peers inside.

JULIA'S POV: An OLD MAN is lying on a cot, apparently unconscious. Ellen checks his pulse, adjusts his blankets. Jason sits on the bottom step, fists under his chin, soberly observing.

An overhead light flips on. Ellen is startled; Officer Malone steps downstairs. She rushes up the stairs crying while Officer Malone leads Jason by the hand.

Julia pries open the window and crawls inside.

INT. BASEMENT, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia's foot finds the steel counter of the band saw. She steps down to the workbench, then to some crates, then the floor. She turns on a desk lamp.

Ellen's husband, HAROLD, rolls over and groans, gone to the world. He wears one-piece, red, long johns. Julia hovers like a humming bird, not knowing where to land. She lifts the covers and recoils from the stench. Backing up, she kicks over an EMPTY WHISKEY BOTTLE, then feels under the bed and dozens more CLINK at her touch. She drags out a recently used BEDPAN. She stands, satisfied, diagnosis complete.

INT. KITCHEN, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Ellen finishes rinsing Harold's plate when she senses another presence. She reels and finds Julia glaring at her.

JULIA

Where is he?

ELLEN

I sent Officer Malone away. I've decided you can stay. There's no use shuffling people around in the middle of the night even if you do have the manners of a heathen ...

Julia walks up to Ellen and smacks her in the face. Ellen winces ... then turns the other cheek.

INT. LIVING ROOM, FARMHOUSE, DIABLO DRIVE — NIGHT

EXTREME CLOSE on AUTOMATIC WALL TIMER plugged into a wall outlet. The indicator clicks to ZERO. All LIGHTS extinguish.

EXT. FARMHOUSE, DIABLO DRIVE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

LONG SHOT of the farmhouse with its front yard and parking circle — Gloria barely discernable against a stripped tree. The house lights suddenly go off. Bruised, bluish clouds closely hold the winter scene in a beautiful, ponderous balance.

Suddenly, SPARKS OF LIGHT dance near the tree, emanating from Gloria's huddled figure. The Sparklers proliferate but stay within the confines of a young girl. The Sparkling Girl wrestles free of Gloria's body like a chick wrestling out of an egg.

Victoriously emerging, SPIRIT GIRL flits about the yard, the parking circle, the windbreak and disappears into the distant field, giggling ecstatically.

INT. BERNICE'S FLAT — NIGHT

Archie sits with his feet propped up on the sofa bed transformed into the bedchamber of a king. Archie sits in robe and pajamas, puffing on a pipe, reading the "Wall Street Journal."

Bernice enters, still wearing the nurse's uniform, and sets out hot tea, lemon, truffles and bonbons. Archie scarfs everything like a man accustomed to being served.

ARCHIE

You haven't got some cheese bread, do you? I always have cheese bread before sleeping.

BERNICE

I have some rye crisps and Jarlsberg. Would you like some?

ARCHIE

Just leave it on the nightstand. I'll polish it off before morning, you can be sure.

Bernice exits. She re-enters carrying Archie's PRESSED CLOTHES, which are hanging on hangers. She lingers, running her hands over the lapels of his coat, and exits.

Suspicious, Archie scoops up his WALLET, KEYS and WRISTWATCH from the nightstand and stuffs it under his pillow.

Bernice re-enters with a TRAY and sets it near the door.

ARCHIE

No, closer. By me.

BERNICE
Will you be needing anything else?

Archie waves her off. She leaves the tray and tiptoes out.

Annoyed at her ignoring his instruction, Archie struggles out of bed and crosses the room for the tray. He notices the bathroom door ajar.

Bernice disrobes with slow, languid grace. She runs the shower and steps in.

Archie climbs in bed, aroused, and hating himself for it.

DISSOLVE TO:

Twenty minutes later. Archie pretends he's sleeping while Bernice enters wearing a loose fitting robe. She clears up the last of the dishes; takes everything to the kitchen.

She re-enters, wiping her hands with lotion. She inspects Archie's clothes one last time, flicking off lint and straightening folds.

ARCHIE
(hoarsely)
You don't have to do that.

BERNICE
I like to.

ARCHIE
Why?

BERNICE
It's been a long time since a man's been in my house.

ARCHIE
Why?

BERNICE
My husband died several years ago.

ARCHIE
Why?

BERNICE
(with difficulty)
He was knifed in a prison riot.

ARCHIE

Why?

BERNICE

Why was he knifed or why was he in jail?

ARCHIE

You'd make a good wife.

BERNICE

He had big hands. And a boy's heart. Couldn't see the end of his money most nights. I'd go to sleep not knowing if I'd wake with him at my side. Some nights I'd wake and he'd be all over me, a fevered boar. He'd surprise me that way. But then he'd leave, and I'd miss him.

Archie leaps out of bed, advancing.

ARCHIE

What are you trying to do? Who do you think you're dealing with? Got me all tanked down and fired up? Think I'll be popping your black skin?

BERNICE

Beauty...

ARCHIE

Goddess...

BERNICE

It's talk. You won't find me in your country-clubbing, soap bubble little life. You can take your snotty kids, false eyebrows, take it home on credit, white bread champing on the 401(k) before its time sons of —

ARCHIE

(grabs her)

I want you.

BERNICE

(smiling)

That's your misfortune.

Bernice tries to slip away, but Archie pins her wrists.

BERNICE (Cont'd)

(expressionless)

No.

ARCHIE

You're not fighting very hard.

BERNICE

You're hurting my wrist.

ARCHIE

Give me your will and see how tender feels.

BERNICE

Don't.

ARCHIE

Love you? Kiss you?

BERNICE

(withering)

You can't. Not where I'm going ...

ARCHIE

You've been playing me like a fiddle all night, and
now, it's my nature to sing!

BERNICE

No. The answer is always no.

ARCHIE

But the bull says "yes."

Archie yanks her up against his body.

ARCHIE

Like this? He held you like this?

Archie kisses her on the neck while she struggles.

ARCHIE

Darling, thank you for this night. The glorious
food. The kindness. It's been a long, long time
since anyone's fussed over ...

Bernice heaves him away, her mocking smile lingering.

ARCHIE (Cont'd)

Don't play games, you bitch.

Archie smacks her and throws her on the couch. Bernice rolls off. Archie
grabs a CANDLESTICK and threatens to hit her. She SCREAMS.

Archie's cell phone RINGS. He's torn — can't make up his mind whether or not to answer. He runs for the door, opens it and flings the CELL PHONE with all his might.

ARCHIE (Cont'd)
Aaaaarrgh! I hate this life!

He slams the door; has made a decision. He pats the CANDLESTICK in his hand like a Billy club. Like a tiger, he slowly stalks his prey. Bernice has disappeared.

ARCHIE

Come on now, sugar. I wasn't going to harm you. Just a little excited, that's all. You're a powerful, beautiful woman, you know that? Any man can't help but notice. I wasn't gonna harm you, honest. Where are you, sugar? Where —

From behind, Bernice slips out of a closet and cracks Archie in the skull with a CROWBAR. He crumbles to the floor. She slumps into the wall, collapsing with relief.

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT

Julia, Jason and Robby sit on the bed while Officer Malone leads a procession through the living room: PARAMEDICS, Harold lying in a stretcher, FIREMEN and, finally, Ellen wiping her eyes.

Finally, the room empties. Julia hands the PICTURE BOOK to Robby and climbs off the bed.

JULIA
Stay here, all right?

The boys nod. Julia walks tentatively into the living room. Looks around. Exits to the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Julia enters not knowing what she's about to do. She hears SOUNDS rustling from the basement. She feels her way around the kitchen and locates coffee grounds and filters in a cupboard. She starts a pot.

Suddenly, Julia senses she is not alone. She turns and finds Ellen glaring at her.

JULIA

I thought I'd make coffee. Figured we could all use some. Why don't you go by the fire and I'll bring it when it's ready.

ELLEN

He's not always like that. He just got carried away with the holiday punch.

JULIA

(shakes head)

He's been lying there for weeks. Maybe months.

ELLEN

He's not a bad man. He's ...

JULIA

(shouts)

Silence!

(recovers poise)

Now. I want to freeze this moment. While I still have some compassion for you. If you say another blessed word, I swear, I'll despise you for the rest of my life.

ELLEN

(turns and leaves)

Don't use that tone of voice. I'm not your mother.

JULIA

(throws towel)

What's with these litigators?

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — LATER

Jason and Robby sleep side by side, entwined like puppies. Their books lie in piles about them.

EXT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Ellen wipes her tears bitterly, ashamed of weakness in any form. Julie enters with COFFEE MUGS and sits on the arm of the sofa.

JULIA

I see you've got a bird in there. How about I do him up tomorrow? I'm a fair cook and roast chicken is my specialty.

Ellen nods reluctantly, capitulating to the vanquishing Huns. Julia withdraws to the kitchen.

EXT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT

Hal holds up Dexter who spies through a small rectangular window meant for trace lighting, not viewing. Stranded Travelers from the motel enter the front doors tentatively, covered with snow.

DEXTER

Tension. Better serve the bisque right away, it's slightly alkaline. Oh, why not — and the Merlot.

Hal squeezes him affectionately and starts to leave, but Dexter holds him back.

DEXTER

There goes Ellen Potsdam. What does she spray her hair with, acrylic?

HAL

That woman is Mount Rushmore.

DEXTER

You could shovel the roads with those curls. And Mavis Bedatkin, that slut-ish troll. The guys at the garage tell me her lube service is extraordinary.

HAL

Are you finished? Besides, I've already had the 60,000 mile tune up.

DEXTER

Slut!

(Hal shrugs helplessly)

And what's up with Bernice showing up in a nurse's getup? Size 8 — who is she kidding? Swipes my wastebasket — wants to borrow a week's supply of anal probes! Used!

HAL

Now you leave Bernice alone!

DEXTER

(sulking)

I hear she's a walking pharmacy.

HAL

I don't care if she shows up in a chicken suit,

she polished this place on a moment's notice. Now cut it out. These are real people, doing the best they can.

DEXTER

That's what truly frightens me.

Hal leaves to attend to the soup.

Twenty minutes later. Hal walks up the staircase and finds Dexter crawling about on elbows and knees like a crab, convulsing. Hal dives to the floor.

HAL

What is it?

But Dexter is spastic with laughter.

DEXTER

Vermilion! Sylvia's wearing taupe with the vermillion!

Hal doesn't know whether to laugh or to slug him.

An hour later. Dexter pulls away from the spy hole. Hal relaxes in bed; folds up the newspaper.

DEXTER

You know, at this time of year I can't help thinking of Mother. She's at the root of all this — who I am, how we met, my illness — as if I rebounded from her every influence ...

HAL

Don't now.

DEXTER

As I rise above my condition, I see her reflection in all I am leaving. It makes me sad. I forgive her for cutting me out of her Will. I certainly didn't expect, what with twelve children, that I'd inherit her fortune. I certainly don't need the money. How many can say that? It's just that sense of feeling I belonged. To my family. This place. All those strangers downstairs at our table, and we're not invited.

HAL

(lights a joint)

Come to bed.

Dexter does so; takes a hit and rests his head on Hal's chest.

INT. HALL, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — NIGHT

The door seems to bend with MALONE'S MOOSE CALLS. The tempo is starting to drag. Ava's "AHS" and "OOHS" sound less like pleasure and more like what the cat dragged in.

INT. FOYER, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — NIGHT — LATER

Officer Malone trudges to the front door. Ava steers him from behind. As he raises his hat, it falls to the floor. Ava opens the door and steps in it. She laughs, falls backward, shakes her foot and the hat flies out the door.

Ava sinks to the floor laughing. Malone grabs the railing with both hands for stability. Ava swings the door hitting him behind in the butt. We hear a body SPLAT on the sidewalk. Ava guffaws from the floor.

There's a FAINT KNOCK at the door. Ava opens it a crack. Officer Malone hands in the key to Ava who places it between her breasts.

OFFICER MALONE

The key.

AVA

You know where to find it, Wild Billy.

MALONE

Keep it warm.

Ava hisses and scratches his hand. He withdraws; door latches.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT

This time, Hal spies out the peephole while Dexter lies in bed.

HAL

Ssssh! Someone's proposing a toast.

DEXTER

Let me see!

Dexter gets up and makes his way to the window.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

About 70 Stranded Travelers sit around a long, makeshift table elegantly arrayed — bohemian but tasteful. Candlelight glints off the teeth of happy faces.

MAYOR TOMPKINS, wearing a business suit and SANTA'S HAT, stands at the head of the table. He raises his WINEGLASS to the crowd.

MAYOR TOMPKINS

Hear ye, hear ye, the Mayor is about to speak.

(sings)

"Deck the halls ..."

SYLVIA TOMPKINS

(hates this)

Can it, Ernie.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Hal and Dexter compete for the window.

DEXTER

Together at last?

HAL

It's been a whole year.

DEXTER

Imagine their sex lives!

HAL

Here comes the toast!

DEXTER

I bet he fucks it up for sure.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

MAYOR TOMPKINS

I welcome you all to Visher Ferry, where the sleet meets the street. Ha-ha.

(fierce glance from Sylvia)

Oh ... I know you've all experienced some discomfort with the upset in plans and all, but I trust you've found the good citizens of our tiny community a good and welcoming kind. Hear, hear!

Cheers from the locals; disinterest from the Stranded Travelers.

MAYOR TOMPKINS

And now I want to thank all the folks who brought food and plates and knives and forks and every-thing we need in this grand palacio. I smell a proud turkey basting, and I know you're all in for a real treat. If I'm not mistaken, that soup — just outstanding — was only the starters.

More cheers.

MAYOR (Cont'd)

And now if you'll all raise your glasses, I'd like to propose a toast to our good Sheriff Malone, who conceived and executed a brilliant plan of — where the hell is he? — on a moment's notice, placing 156 weary travelers into proper, Christian homes on a snowy Christmas Eve!

More applause.

MAYOR (Cont'd)

Oh — and before I forget! We have a celebrity in our midst! Yes, a rising star in the music world has agreed to regale us with his special holiday — where the hell is he? — performed for free in this very room!

Hip hip hoorays.

MAYOR (Cont'd)

And finally, a special thanks to our host, or should I say hostess —
(winks)

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Dexter pulls back from the window, alarmed. Hal stirs.

DEXTER

Oh my God! He's introducing me. I'm not dressed.
I can't possibly make an appearance like this!

HAL

(worried)

Don't go there.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

MAYOR TOMPKINS

Drum roll please! Yes, a fine person who opened up her doors on a cold bitter night when there was no room at the Inn. A beloved lady who went to great trouble and expense preparing her award winning cuisine for a bunch of road weary stragglers. Ladies and gentleman, our host-ess with the most-ess, Miss Mavis Bedatkin!

Mayor Tompkins swings his WINEGLASS to Mavis, who bolts upright. A few gasps of shock filter through the crowd.

INT. LOFT, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Dexter freezes, dressed in a long blond wig and silk Chinese robe.

DEXTER

Mavis?

HAL

Easy pal.

DEXTER

Bedatkin?

HAL

You'll only make yourself upset.

DEXTER

That greasy trollop? Of sidewall fame? Now I know where she's been giving service these days, but it is not in my fucking kitchen.

Dexter hobbles to the door, tangling on his medical lines. Hal tries to stop him.

HAL

No you don't, buddy. You're not going down there.

Dexter breaks free and yanks a power cord from the socket. The machines go dead. Dexter's rage is terrifying even to Hal.

DEXTER

Credit where credit is due. This is my home. My food. My guests. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke!

Dexter exits, hobbling down the staircase. Suddenly a long, terrifying, airborne moment. Then a LOUD CLAMOR as Dexter falls headlong down the staircase.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

All faces turn in horror at the CLAMAROUS SOUNDS of Dexter falling down the stairs. He lands blocking the kitchen entrance. He groans with anger and pain. He can't get up, but struggles fiercely.

DEXTER

How very nice to meet you all. My name is Dexter. This is my house. You are sitting in my chairs. At my table. Eating my food. With the finest cutlery from, I don't know, Pakistan. My recipes are an heirloom handed down many generations, from my mother to her mother to her mother's mother before they all decided to disinherit me.

Hal enters and scoops up Dexter in his arms.

DEXTER (Cont'd)

This is my lover, Hal. He gave me AIDS. We have not been invited to this august occasion, your very presence gracing the sanctuary of this, my home.

HELGA, the new cook, oblivious to the commotion, enters carrying a huge roasted TURKEY ON A PLATTER. Dexter grabs the platter while Helga starts, then fights for control of the tray.

DEXTER (Cont'd)

This is — who the hell are you? — I've never met this person before in my life. But she is a genius minimum wage worker who has taken my recipes and followed them to the letter, adding nothing original of her own. Thank you, genius minimum wage worker!

You've met our illustrious Mayor, Ernie Tompkins, whose divine mission in life is ... owning things. Buildings, shops, people. He's recently given Mavis Bedatkin all the credit for every pleasure you enjoy this evening. And the reason, of course, is Mavis'

outstanding lube service to the male promontory,
unbeknownst to the spouses of this community,
except possibly Sylvia — but money isn't
every-thing, is it, Sylvia darling?

Sylvia rises and exits. Mayor Tompkins trails her apologetically. He turns to the crowd, spinning his finger around his temple to indicate Dexter has a mental condition.

DEXTER (Cont'd)

Mavis also did not decorate this room. What she did do was spawn three illegitimate children all given up for adoption.

Mavis takes it; bows her head in shame.

And might I introduce our turkey — dark, bronze and baked to perfection? Stuffed with tasty bits of oyster and sage sautéed in butter and rum.

Dexter begins tearing off TURKEY PIECES and flinging them at the stupefied guests. Helga exits into the kitchen wailing.

HAL

(crying into his back)

Enough. Please, enough.

DEXTER

Why, I've just started carving the little bugger —
by the way, where is Ernie?

EXT. FIELDS OUTSIDE VISHER FERRY — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

A still, solemn landscape. Faint but shrill SOUNDS OF SCREAMING are heard — at first alarming, then as it gets closer, welcoming as they reveal SCREAMS OF UNBRIDLED JOY.

The SPIRIT GIRL (Wendy) bolts across the fields trailing an immense elongated robe of shimmering energy. She races for the lights of town.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — CONTINUOUS

Dexter gouges CHUNKS OF MEAT and flings it at the crowd.

DEXTER

(unraveling)

This is my body. This is my breast. Take it. And he whosoever eats of it shall become my body and my breast. And when you have eaten, and known how hard I tried, with every fiber of my being — tried when I was sick, tried when I was dying, tried with every trick known to man, but there was nothing to be done, but to stand there, helplessly, stupidly — needing only what I might have grasped and dragged deep inside my bones, the thought that one of you — just one of you — could give the slightest shit for my life!

Dexter faints. Hal clutches him, crying helplessly into his back.

HAL

I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry.

Long beat as everyone stares in shock. Finally, one by one, a few Women Travelers get up and administer to Dexter, clean up the mess, tend to the kitchen.

Dexter's POV: The FAINT SCREAMS of the Spirit Girl are fast approach-ing. Suddenly, she bursts through the walls, races through the middle of the banquet table and falls, like Bambi skidding on the ice, SCREAMING AT THE TOP OF HER LUNGS.

SPIRIT GIRL

It's all about Love! Removing obstacles to Love!

She slams into Dexter's body with a THUD.

EXTREME CLOSE on Dexter: he comes to.

DEXTER

Mother?

The Women gather round, deeply concerned.

Sam enters and shuffles to the place vacated by Mayor Tompkins. He takes out a few crumpled SHEETS OF PAPER from a torn pocket and clears his throat.

SAM

Let me see. Oh yes. I — just a minute. Got to get organized.

(pockets a page)

No, I already gave that at the Elks. Here. Now — where did I put my glasses? Oh yeah, I don't wear

any! Okay!

Ladies and gentleman, wallets and bracelets. It's bitter cold this High Holy Day when I sludged through frozen waste so sharp my toes felt the sting of God's hammers! And the warmth sang off the glass like the breath of an angel. Warmth. Comes from light, you know. I could see my stocking feet, too, which is good 'cause they've long lost sensation. I also saw my old clothes, torn and threadbare. I looked inside the diner at y'all. Y'all had nice clothes. Starched. Might I add fragrant? And I looked up at an icicle pointing down from the gutter, thinking if I even blink, that frozen dagger will lodge in my skull and that'll be the end of me!

And I hear myself saying, "Thanks." The choice to resent what you lack, or give thanks what you have. And I was grateful.

(pounds table)

This is a speech about gratitude! You might be looking at me, saying, "What's he got to be grateful for? Can we even call him a man, a dog, a cur? A rat has better raiments." But I've got seventeen dollars and forty-three cents and I know tonight I'll eat like a prize hog at the county fair!

You might be thinking, "Oh, he'll spend it all on hooch," and maybe I will. And my blood will feel a thrill it hasn't felt all season.

So, why gratitude? What's the good of it? Life gets so harsh sometimes it seems no earthly good at all! Well, I'm here, tonight, ladies and gentlemen, to tell you "grateful" is "great" and "full."

For years I worked right here in town, yessiree, a short order cook at Dinah's Lantern, where the boss yells so ornery sometimes and you got to clean up the slop before you leave. I didn't like maximum labor for minimum pay, so when the Food Inspector comes 'round, I leveraged a worker revolt! And they fired me.

Couldn't meet my bills, so I was tossed out in the street and my life became a thing of harsh beauty. I slept under a bridge, in a barn, or a field under stars. And all about me life — teaming,

sexy, turgid life, just bursts its gills like a king salmon leapin' over falls — the sun blaring about ya, jump-starting every kicking thing on earth. Rain seeping into sun soaked buckets and doesn't leave a bill. Or my lungs pocketing the breath of a genius! I'm talking profundity!

I'm not saying I'm always happy. I'm not saying some days I'd rather be dead. All I'm saying is once you get them big ticket items off your back and realize — you ain't a gonna get 'em and those who do aren't fit to drink your piss — then you start to notice the little things, the clear and blessed things, offered up for nothing, abundantly, to quench a thirst for life.

(clears throat)

I also do private parties, so if you'd like to ...

Sam notices Ernie's untouched GLASS OF WINE. He shuffles over and sniffs.

SAM (Cont'd)

Hmmm. Modesto Valley Farms. 1974.

(gulps it down)

Aaaaaah. It was shitty then too.

(toasts)

But I'm grateful!

TECHIES from the band "COMA" filter in bearing stage equipment. A BEARDED TECHIE thinks he recognizes Sam and loads him up with SPOTLIGHTS.

TECHIE

Hey dude, where were you? Your agency said we'd meet up in Syracuse. Like, what happened?

Sam blinks without recognition; drops the spotlights with a CRASH and shuffles off to the kitchen.

INT. COMMONS, 257 ABBEY PLACE — LATER THAT NIGHT

EXTREME CLOSE on Mickey singing with COMA BAND MEMBERS. They blast out a heavy metal version of "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow" —

MICKEY

"Oh the weather outside is frightful,
but the fire is so delightful
And since we've no place to go,
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!"

It doesn't show signs of stopping,
and I brought some ..."

Mickey can't remember the lyrics. He turns to the Band Members who can't help. He shrugs and begins inchoate SCREECHING while the Band shifts into HYPER DRIVE.

INT. BERNICE'S FLAT — THAT NIGHT

Archie is gagged and hog-tied to a chair. When he comes to, he finds about a dozen chopsticks wrapped in anal probe covers logged in his mouth, his nose, his ears.

Bernice sips coffee and watches dully, struggling through a fog.

BERNICE

In case you're wondering, they come from a man
dying of AIDS.

(long pause)

You tried to rape me. Made war in my house. Ate
my food. Slept on my couch. You're dangerous,
you know that? Is that why you win? Always
getting your way? I bet you have a fine house. A
nice car in a two-car garage.

(Archie struggles)

Your eyes say it all. Do you hate that I'm not
afraid to give what little I have? Or I'll pick your
pockets in your sleep, after you've had your way
with me?

(flops a wallet on the table)

Mr. Archibald Samuelson. A nice WASP name
... with you're nice, white wife and nice white kids
going to nice white schools.

You like my food? I learned it from my
grandmother. She had a farm in Alabama. I
learned her cooking while my parents were coming
off heroine. Just another musical family from
Harlem.

Well, I'm really sad for you, Mr. Samuelson. Sad to
have ever met you. Taken you in. Showed you
the fine time you could have had in my cinder block
home. But I wanted to see The Man. The White
Man who says whether I'll eat or have a job
tomorrow.

Once I studied to be a nurse. One week before
commencement, a white man raped me. I got

pregnant. Got dragged through surgery, sudden change of address and food stamps. When I thought I'd finally kill the thing off, the social worker said I was unfit and took it away.

Then I met Lester. Big. Black. Sexier than a cougar. Our nights were like fireworks on the fourth of July. He left me for the road, but I always took him back. Then some crackers raided their tour bus, busted heads and threw 'em all in jail for possession. Three years later my proud black man gets stabbed 'cause some white trash guard can't beat the black out of him.

What's with you people? What's with your master-race-slave system? What's with you never-been-breast-fed, plastic-nipple-babies turned out so mean?

All we doin' is trying to lift our heads high enough to see the next shore. Without some sick, twisted white shit kicking away our stools, our small measure of accomplishment. We been wiping your snot nose ways for ever so long and — look me in the eye — we're damned tired.

It's the ingratitude, the mother fucking ingrat-i-tude. And you ain't done nothin', nothin', 'cept return stolen property. Badly smashed!

Bernice rises and takes out the chopsticks, one by one, like a surgeon. She plants soft kisses on Archie's cheek.

BERNICE (Cont'd)

They're new, never been used. No, I would never use you. Not even for revenge.

(a kiss)

We endured all these years 'cause, on some level, we must have loved you and your silly peasant struggle.

(another kiss)

And maybe we hoped, someday, you'd come to love us too.

(kissing)

But waiting kills. I miss my Lester. I miss him bad.

(long kiss)

And you will never, ever replace him.

Bernice walks away and empties her hands in the trash. Finally freed, Archie chokes on the air; then sputters with sobs.

INT. BAR ADJACENT DINAH'S LANTERN — NIGHT

Ed is closing up. Chairs are turned over tables. CLEANING HELP are mopping the floor, polishing glasses, etc. Carly enters.

ED

Sorry miss, we're closed.

CARLY

I came to find Bob. Have you seen him?

ED

Yeah, he left about an hour ago.

CARLY

Where'd he go? Do you know where he's staying?

ED

I wouldn't go trailing him if I were you.

CARLY

It's a free country.

ED

Just take some friendly advice and forget him for tonight. He's busy.

CARLY

Did he ...? Well okay, but I owe him some money. I'm leaving tomorrow, so can you tell me his address?

ED

It's your funeral. He's in the trailer behind Jack's Palace. He's got company, though. Wouldn't stop by before noon.

CARLY

Thanks.

She exits quickly into bristling snow flurries.

INT. CAB, BOB'S BIG RIG — NIGHT — LATER

Bob pulls his rig to a stop. BLYTHE sits next to him. They gaze at each other with deep, inebriated longing. Suddenly they kiss.

BLYTHE
(pulling away)

Are you sure you're not married?

BOB

I already told you! I made that mistake before.

BLYTHE

You got married before?

BOB

I didn't mean ... Forget it.

(opens arms)

Come here, woman.

They clinch. Blythe gets another panic attack and withdraws.

BLYTHE

It's only I have to make sure 'cause I don't like coming between a married man and his family. Besides, it hasn't worked out for me ... in the long run. Single men, however, men with good income potential, I could really go for, 'know what I mean?'

BOB

Baby, sugar, angel, darlin', my potential's about to explode!

BLYTHE

Oh Zeus! Zeus!

Blythe paws at him voraciously. Bob reciprocates. The clothes start to fly. Suddenly, Blythe suddenly starts shrieking.

BLYTHE

No, not my stocking, my new silk — you clumsy galoot! Get me out of this, this contraption! Don't you have any place more respectable? I have to see your house! I won't be lied to, cheated or hurt ever, ever again!

BOB

My checkbook's in the house. I'll show you mine if you show me yours.

BLYTHE
(enthralled)
I love your mind, you dirty skunk!

They clinch again. Bob goes for the gold.

BLYTHE
(shrieking again)
Not here, oh God! I spent \$12.95 just to have my hair looking nice and I'm not letting some sweating pig take me in his truck!

BOB
That does it. If you insult me one more time, I'm going to make you walk all the way back to Dinah's. Do you want me or not? What do you want?

BLYTHE
(whining)
I just need a little direction.

EXT. BOB's BIG RIG — NIGHT — SECONDS LATER

Bob helps Blythe clamber down from the rig. They make a frantic dash for the TRAILER. Suddenly she stops.

BLYTHE
This ain't no house. It's a goddamn trailer? Where the hell will we be tomorrow, the Everglades? In three feet of water? Staring alligators in the face?

BOB
I have a house, I swear I do! The deeds and mortgage are all inside. Come, don't be afraid. Please. Don't stop love now.

BLYTHE
Ain't that a song or somethin'?

They enter the trailer.

INT. ED'S TRAILER — NIGHT — CONTINUOUS

Inside it is dark. Bob and Blythe fall into a couch nearby. Just as the moaning begins, a BARE OVERHEAD BULB floods the room with a merciless glare.

Carly — her hair done up in curlers, wearing a baggy sweater and long skirt stuffed up to feign pregnancy — rushes at them wielding a BUTCHER'S KNIFE. Blythe starts SHRIEKING.

CARLY

(hillbilly accent)

Aha! Finally cawcha red-handed, ya cheatin' dawg! Where ya goin', bitch! I want ta cut a lock a yer hair as a souvenir for mah husband's scrapbook. Volume Twelve. Gonna stuff a fuckin' sofa!

Blythe exits like a burning comet, buttoning herself on the way. Bob's mouth gapes open, overwhelmed. He points and babbles incoherently.

Carly slumps to the couch, regarding the butcher's knife with unhealthy regard. Bob sits next to her, awed.

BOB

You're insane. And this time, I think Freud would agree. What in heaven's name are you doing? I can't believe you did that. You're very, very sick. Are you alright?

CARLY

Desperate measures for desperate people.
Anyway, I needed the practice.

BOB

For what? "Miss Teenage Meat Cleaver?"

CARLY

Practice for getting what I want. Not winding up a victim.

BOB

Why are you always so weird? What do you want from me?

Carly starts crying and drops the knife to the floor.

BOB

There, there. You're feeling bad. Don't mind me. I'm kinda in a crisis myself. Just sit there and let it all out. It's okay.

(gets up)

I'm going nowhere. Just to the john. Men's stuff. I'm right here, all the time. Right here.

Bob exits to the bathroom. Closes the door. Bumps into things.

CARLY

I feel so horrible. It must be the season, you know? Like Christmas, you know? Like I feel, you know, I should be getting something? Like a present, you know? A little attention? Some tiny shred of something nice just for me? Cookies?

(Bob bangs an elbow)

BOB (O.S.)

Ow, goddamn it!

(SOUNDS of ZIPPING)

(Carly sobs)

But you have my undivided attention. Now tell me what's going on.

CARLY

Oh, it's Mickey! He just ignores me sometimes. Not like, well, music's his thing and I'm not a creative person. I wanted to be with him tonight — just us — by ourselves — being Christmas Eve and all. But I want him to be happy, too. So he's jamming with Guy and Peter at the church, happy as a lark. Anyway, I let him be and left.

So I'm wandering around town, feeling like a pod person in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" — director's cut — when I decided to take you up on your offer, you know? Just talk, no obligations? I went to the bar but Ed sent me here and —

BOB (O.S.)

(strained voice)

I'll have to talk with Ed.

CARLY

— but you weren't there! And I waited and waited.

(fishes in handbag)

I wrote a song about it. Want to hear it?

BOB (O.S.)

Not particularly.

CARLY

(more tragic sobs)

Then you drove up and I was so GLAD to see you, but that other woman was there and like, you know, something snapped. I know I have no claim on you — God, I'm the other, other woman — but just seeing you with her brought up all this jealousy and rage and I, I ...

It's Mickey I'm mad at for ignoring me when I needed him most. Misplaced. All my anger is misplaced. I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere.

(her moment of truth)

I miss my Daddy.

Carly sobs through old wounds. Bob enters, visibly relieved, and sits next to her.

BOB

It's okay. I don't belong here either, but circum-stances don't see it my way. You went to a lot of trouble to find me.

(opens his arms)

Always fighting, always sticking your neck way too far for you to handle all alone. Wanting in the end a little comfort, a little kindness. Well, tonight I'll be your comfort, so make yourself at home. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to do anything. Just sit here with me, like a little girl on daddy's knee, underneath the Christmas tree.

CARLY

Oh, Bob. I'm so alone.

She buries her face in his side.

INT. SO. MAIN ST., NEAR JACK'S PALACE — NIGHT

A lonely stretch of road outside town, all but smothered in darkness. We hear the SOUND of a SNOWPLOW approaching from behind. Suddenly, it bursts into view, a dark metallic monster, thundering towards town. A freak slash of streetlight illuminates the DRIVER: could it be? a NURSE IN A SNOW WHITE UNIFORM. Before we're sure, the plow hurtles into oblivion.

INT. A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

Wendy wakes up and yawns. She touches Grandpa's face questioningly.

WENDY

I fell asleep.

GRANDPA

I had to go on. A story has a life of its own, you know...

WENDY

Go on. I'll stay awake this time.

INT. ED'S TRAILER — SUNRISE

Bob and Carly sleep fully clothed underneath a common blanket. Carly wakes and quietly disentangles herself. She tucks Bob in gently, lovingly, trying not to wake him.

Still sleeping, Bob turns over and grabs the pillow lasciviously, like a frequent, welcomed guest. Carly laughs silently to herself and tiptoes out.

INT. JOE'S TRAILER — MORNING

Deborah fixes breakfast in the kitchen. The living room reveals her hand — straightened, more efficiently arranged. SOUNDS of JOE SINGING from the shower stall.

DEBORAH

How do you take your eggs?

JOE (O.S.)

Hot and saucy.

Deborah shivers; splices up the eggs. The shower turns off; a TOWEL SLAPS a few times. Deborah enters and slips EGGS into Joe's plate and then her own. She disappears.

Joe enters wrapped in a towel, drying his hair. He smiles approvingly.

JOE

Scrambled! Just the way I like 'em.

DEBORAH (O.S.)

I thought so.

She enters again, minus the apron, and sits down.

DEBORAH (Cont'd)
(smirking)
Should I thank the Lord or will you?

JOE
Don't forget the Mother. She did all the heavy lifting, you know.

DEBORAH
(ever surprised by him)
Are you pagan?

JOE
I'm a realist. If we men had to go through childbirth —

DEBORAH
— I know the rest. "The human race would die tomorrow." Fortunately, that's what we women are for.

JOE
I'm beginning to wonder.

DEBORAH
(stops eating)
What do you mean by that?

JOE
(eats)
Eggs, yum.

DEBORAH
(resumes)
You slipped out of that one nicely.

Deborah eats with mannered restraint, watching Joe intently. She has become quite shy with him.

DEBORAH (Cont'd)
Joe?

JOE
Hmmmm.

DEBORAH
What about us?

JOE

What about us?

DEBORAH

I mean, you don't think that, together, I mean, we have a future ...

JOE

I don't expect you to leave your husband, no. If that's what you —

DEBORAH

I'm relieved. I didn't know what to think. We were two people caught up in something ... impulses ... it's not the basis of a meaningful ... I have two grandchildren.

JOE

No strings attached.

DEBORAH

You mean it?

JOE

I mean it.

DEBORAH

You know, Joe, I've grown quite fond of you.

JOE

You don't have to throw me a bone.

DEBORAH

I'm not throwing ... Of all the ... How rude! After last night? It's presumptuous, young ma-, Joe, to tell me what I feel or to characterize in any manner what I gave.

JOE

Or what you took.

DEBORAH

What I took, gave. Please don't travail it. My affection is real.

JOE

But your commitment is not.

DEBORAH

Really, I don't understand you. I don't want' to leave on bad terms, but ... I want us to ...

JOE

Harmonize?

DEBORAH

Yes, if that's what you want to call it.

JOE

That's what I want to call it.

DEBORAH

What's the matter? Are you angry? Was it something I said? Or did?

JOE

I'm not angry. You don't want commitment and I'm not asking for one. All the same ...

DEBORAH

All the same, what? Tell me?

JOE

Just settling up some business.

DEBORAH

Business! What business?

JOE

I do expect to be paid.

Deborah drops her fork. She knows what she heard, but can't believe it.

DEBORAH

How many women tramp through your little love nest, young man? Rest assured, I am certainly not one of your ...

(chokes; whispers)

Beg pardon?

JOE

Paid. I have to be paid.

DEBORAH

What do you mean "paid"?

JOE

Pay me. For what you took. You're a businesswoman.

DEBORAH

Young man — JOE! — I gave as much as I took. This isn't a ... you don't think I have to pay for ... You can't be serious. It's not the money. It's that you take money? From women?

JOE

(stretching smugly)

I'm always paid. Sometimes it's women.

It is now, In the background, we see a FRAMED PORTRAIT of Mayor Ernie Tompkins.

DEBORAH

Well, what do I tell my accountant? Is this kind of thing tax deductible? I don't know what to say.

JOE

Just ante up and we're even.

DEBORAH

Of course I won't. I had no idea. I mean you can't just bait and switch without knowing. It's not the money. This hurts, Joe. This really hurts, you know that? This really, really hurts because I thought you cared something, a little something for me, too ...

JOE

(sincere)

I love you, Deborah. And I know you love me too.

DEBORAH

Well, what? Cash? Master card or Visa? Will you take a bloody check?

JOE

It's nothing personal.

DEBORAH

Send me a fucking bill, okay — I don't give a shit. How much, by the way? How much do you think this little tryst was worth?

JOE

I want you to pay for what you took, consider the carnage, and we're even.

DEBORAH

Carnage? Fuck you, young man. Eat shit and die you cracker Eco Nazi creep!

Deborah stomps out the door and slams it. She enters immediately, grabs her coat, boots and bag, and exits. Joe leans back, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

JOE

Whew, Lordy!

INT. BERNICE'S FLAT — MORNING

Poised for business, Archie stands, finishing his coffee. He is subdued and puff-eyed.

Bernice enters with a pot of coffee and searches Archie questioningly. Archie shakes his head. Bernice slips back into the kitchen. Archie pulls out his wallet and fishes out SEVERAL BILLS.

Bernice enters and starts clearing away the dishes. Tentatively, Archie offers her the cash. Bernice retreats; shakes her head. Archie presses.

ARCHIE

For all your trouble.

BERNICE

No. I want you to be obliged. I want you to —

ARCHIE

Your house will haunt me the rest of my life. I cannot pay the debt. Not all at once. Not in this lifetime.

Bernice lets the money drop to the table and disappears into the kitchen.

Archie pulls on his overcoat, hat and gloves. Bernice enters with a SACK LUNCH and a SHEET OF PAPER. Archie puts on his reading glasses and reviews it.

ARCHIE

I can't.

BERNICE

You promised and you will. Go on, take it. Your penances. Put it on your nightstand ... where you dream.

Archie pockets his glasses and the list. He takes one last look around, opens the door and walks into a BLAST OF SUNLIGHT.

INT. KITCHEN, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — MORNING

Julia dries the dishes while Ellen rolls out A PIECRUST. Julia can't help but admire her skill.

JULIA

So that's how it's done.

ELLEN

You boil the water first, along with the oil and salt.
(demonstrates)
You could make a girdle with it.

Julia turns surprised — a sense of humor! Wrong! Ellen suddenly grabs a GLASS MEASURING CUP and hurls it against the cupboard. SMASH!

JULIA

Jesus!

ELLEN

That's my line.

Ellen next hurls a porcelain MIXING BOWL. It knocks the WALL CLOCK to the floor, SHATTERING both.

ELLEN (Cont'd)

That's for you, Larry. Abandoning Robby on Christmas? How could you?

JULIA

Larry's not with —

ELLEN

He's in detox!

Stunned, Julia hands her the PLATE she is drying. Ellen pitches it. CRASH!

ELLEN (Cont'd)
 Goddamn you men for making liars out of me!

Ellen grabs the ROLLING PIN and dangerously cocks her arm.

JULIA
 No wait!

Julia exits, dragging Ellen by the arm.

INT. LIVING ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — DAY — SECONDS LATER

Ellen SCREAMS BLOODY MURDER while smashing the ROLLING PIN into the sofa cushion with both hands. Julia spots her from behind.

ELLEN
 Liars! Drunkards! I bore you bastards, I bore you all! Oh God, God!

She moves to the wall and bookshelves, smashing HAPPY FAMILY PORTRAITS. She has finally, totally lost it. Terrified, Julia leaps out of range.

JULIA
 Into the cushion! The cushion!

ELLEN
 (threatening Heaven)
 "I will wail and howl: I will go stripped and naked!" [Mic. 1:8]

JULIA
 (desperate to distract)
 I didn't know the Bible came in a Newt Gingrich version!

Ellen drops the rolling pin to the floor, LAUGHING, and falls to her knees; it soon transitions into sobbing. Julia gently helps her lie on the floor.

An hour later. Ellen lies on the floor — relaxed, lucid, a pillow propped under her tired head. She lies in an island of used Kleenexes. Julia hunches nearby, an eager, patient witness.

ELLEN
 Anyway, he turned out just like his father. Weak, weak. Business was too harsh. He buckled. Started with pot. Then a little powder. Got in with the wrong crowd. Anisha watched him spin out of

control. Took a few beatings herself, then flew back to India. Her family would never tolerate such a display ...

JULIA

He's healing. Give him credit for that. And time.

ELLEN

My Harold, I'm afraid, is a lost cause. I gave him all I could. Thought God's love would cure him, through me, but I was wrong.

JULIA

Back there, in the feeling, you said, "No. Take your hands off me." You sounded like a little girl. What was that? Who were you speaking to?

Ellen holds her breath. She sees her memories clearly but refuses to divulge them.

ELLEN

"When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up." [Ps. 27: 1]

Julia smiles sadly, sensing Ellen's secret but feeling excluded.

INT. DINAH'S LANTERN — DAY

Deborah is eating a huge FARMER'S BREAKFAST. Her mouth is stuffed and tears stream down her cheeks. The waitress sets a large BOWL OF GRITS next to her, as if to say, "Do you really want to do this to yourself, dear?" Deborah nods "Yes, I do."

Mayor Tompkins enters, grabs a BUTCHER'S PACKAGE from the counter and holds the door open for FIVE NURSES IN HATS AND COATS exiting out the front door.

INT. KITCHEN, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — DAY — LATER THAT A.M.

Ellen and Julia face off, suppressing smiles. They bend down together and open the oven door. Ellen pulls out her apple pie, baked to golden perfection; Julia forks her bird — it's done.

JULIA

It's better than sex!

ELLEN
(musical)
Oh, My dear, I can't remember that far!

Robby and Jason explode into the room.

ROBBY
Grams, can we open presents?

ELLEN
How was your Grandpa?

JASON
He had to have a bath so we left. Officer Malone drove us.

ROBBY
He blew the siren and everything!

ELLEN
(to Julia)
Won't you stay another day?
(Julia shakes her head)
(to Robby)
Let's open our presents tonight, by the fire, just you and me. Do you mind?

JULIA
(to Jason)
We're having dinner in a few minutes; then we're leaving.

ROBBY
Can I give Jason one of my presents?

ELLEN
That would be lovely.

JASON
Gee!

Robby and Jason bolt from the room.

ELLEN
Your Jason is a beautiful boy. You've done very well with him.

JULIA

If it weren't for my building, I don't know what I'd do! We're practically a co-op. Half of us did time on a kibbutz.

Ellen stares long at Julia, with wry admiration.

ELLEN

"Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above my people." [Ex 19:5]

JULIA

(shy)

"There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." [1 Cor. 12:4]

INT. KITCHEN, 257 ABBEY PLACE — LATE MORNING

Dexter is propped up in a chair, blankets draped over his lap, pillows on his back. The last of the Women Travelers put on their coats, squeezing Dexter reassuringly on the way out. Hal is drying dishes.

DEXTER

Thanks for staying.

Officer Malone eats a turkey drumstick with his fingers.

OFFICER MALONE

How thoughtful to save me a piece. I'd never miss your famous turkey roast if I could help it.

DEXTER

Don't thank me. You don't know where it's been.

Hal turns, sharing Dexter's deviltry.

OFFICER MALONE

So you carved the gizzards off our dear Mayor, did you?

DEXTER

I hate hypocrisy. I may not be much, but I'm proud of who I am.

OFFICER MALONE

I have to thank you again. Really, I wouldn't and shouldn't have, but ...

DEXTER

Oh, I love the soap operas. And last night, I think we hit a high "C"!

HAL

Last night outdid anything you have ever done.

DEXTER

(giggling wildly)

My gown was so perfect! The cutest baggy-blue hospital frock with faint bouquet of bare ass! How frightful!

(clapping deliriously)

I want an Emmy! I want an Emmy!

OFFICER MALONE

(amused)

You know I hate that queer crap. I'm outta here.

(kisses Dexter's head)

You be good.

(to Hal)

You too, Hot Buns.

HAL

(patronizing)

So long, Your Delicacy.

OFFICER MALONE

I've got to get out there and collect for our road crew. Worked straight through the night without stopping.

DEXTER

That's brave. That's really, utterly brave. I could never have done that. Never, never, never, never, never.

OFFICER MALONE

Call me if you need me.

He exits.

Dexter smiles beatifically, gazing far into the distance. Hal dries his hands, removes the apron and kneels behind Dexter. He embraces Dexter's waist, as if to hold onto the life that's ebbing fast. Dexter strokes Hal's face.

DEXTER

Imagine raising children in this day and age. Sending kids off to armed encampments called "school." The courage it takes, day after day.

(his gentle strokes spell
forgiveness)

I'm moving back to the City. I want to build a hospital — no, a real place for rest and healing. I want to build a space so grand it will house all the ills of this world.

HAL

Why not pitch a tent over Manhattan?

DEXTER

(regards this seriously)

Finally, a taste for the grand design?

HAL

Do you really want to encourage ... death?

DEXTER

That's true. Well, something smaller then. Petite. Something warm and cozy, somewhere near and dear to a heart's desire. Where space is grand, air is clear — deep in the lap of ... a sanctuary.

Hal and Dexter lock eyes.

HAL

A hospice and half-way house —

DEXTER

— for AIDS.

(pats Hal's cheek)

And you'll bring Helen ...

HAL

No, I —

DEXTER

Please. Let me give you away.

HAL

And my parents?

DEXTER

Bring them all — everyone suffering alone, with no place to go — bring them here.

DEXTER & HAL
(shared "aha" moment)

Slut!

INT. GUEST ROOM, POTSDAM RESIDENCE — DAY

Julia buttons her coat and wraps a scarf around Jason. Ellen enters.

ELLEN

Before you go, I just wanted to ask —

JULIA

(interrupts)

No, don't apologize. There's too much to say and not enough time to say it. Thank you for sharing your beautiful house. Your beautiful grandson. I enjoy you.

(Ellen shakes her head)

In some ways, yes, I really do. You really know how to keep it together.

ELLEN

God bless you, child. And I'm using "God" in the broadest sense. Will you be alright? Did you get through to your Aunt Bea?

JULIA

She was so excited! I'm so relieved. There's nothing can't be fixed by my Aunt Bea — a tear in the lining, a leaky pipe, a broken heart.

(kisses Ellen's cheek, shyly extended)

Make sure Harold takes his medications. And you might look into a nutritionist — it's typical for alco-

ELLEN

(Ellen's Last Stand)

Harry is not an alcoh —

JULIA

(brutal incision)

Al-co-hol-ics —

(then gentle)

— have special dietary needs when getting off a bender. Make sure, make very sure, Harry sees a nutritionist.

ELLEN
(a frightened child)
I promise. I will. But can I ask ...

JULIA
(interrupts again)
See that you do. Or I'll send over my Aunt Bea
with her rolling pin!

Ellen slaps her thigh, laughing like a country fool. Pleased, Julia hoists their luggage and exits. Ellen sees her out. The door CLICKS shut.

Ellen returns, deep in thought. Suddenly rushes out again —

ELLEN (O.S.)
Oh dear, I wanted to ask ...
(returns; V.O.)
Gone. Oh well. Dear God, I place it in your
capable hands ...
(leans dejectedly into jamb)
Teach me how to tell a joke!

INT. COMFORT INN MOTEL — DAY

Mickey and Carly lie naked together in bed. They stare at the ceiling, holding hands like children, glowing with warmth and peace.

CARLY
You know, this is the first time we've slept together
and not had sex. Usually we go at it like a couple
of mad jackhammers.

MICKEY
Right!

CARLY
And yet I'm enjoying you like I haven't enjoyed you
for a long, long time.

MICKEY
Last night? Singing in the gym and everybody
joining in and clapping hands? We were like a
family or something.
(catches Carly staring)
What are you staring at?

CARLY

"You" and "family" in the same sentence. I'm not sure I've ever really seen "you" before.

I'm glad you have this feeling. Today I feel it too. It makes me feel close, and I've been struggling to feel closer to you for a long time. It wasn't 'til I let go of you that I ...

MICKEY

Don't give up on me, Sugar. I've got hollow places I can't fill. I try just about everything.

CARLY

Let's belong to each other, okay? Just for one whole day. After all, Christmas comes but once a lifetime.

MICKEY

You mean once a year?

CARLY

I mean whenever you feel loved.

MICKEY

I do love you.

Kisses her affectionately.

CARLY

(tears well up; whispering)

Thank you.

Mickey blankets her with a deep kiss.

EXT. FRONT YARD, BOB'S HOUSE — DAY

Bob leaps out of his big rig. His WIFE and THREE DAUGHTERS dash out the front door to greet him. Bob's Wife, a heifer of a woman, with an equally massive heart, waves emotionally. Their Three Little Girls giggle as they pick their way through the snow in nightgowns and snow boots. All collide in one big bear hug.

INT. JOE'S TRAILER — DAY

The room is empty and mute. There is a FAINT KNOCK at the door. No answer. The door opens, Deborah tiptoes in and shuts the door.

She draws the blinds — light rushes in. She turns and gasps: her "things" — her complete POWER WARDROBE — hang from every surface like a garage sale. Her empty suitcases are stacked on the couch.

Joe rolls around the corner nonchalantly.

DEBORAH

What have you done?

JOE

You wouldn't pay, so I took it out in trade.

DEBORAH

My blouse, sweater. My new French pantsuit! Even my pearls. You're mad. You're totally, freaking mad!

JOE

It's justice, that's all. Simple balance.

DEBORAH

I took nothing from you!

JOE

See this fur? Minks roamed these woods fifty years ago, but now they're long farmed out. Same for the lynxes, foxes and rabbits. This pantsuit? 40% polyester — comes from oil and you know how we get that! Pearls from oyster beds now refusing to spawn. It seems the Natives spoiled them with the touch and talk.

DEBORAH

How pathetic! Where I come from they pry people like you off trees and stick them in the slammer! You're cocky now, but soon you'll be sewing ski jackets for the military!

JOE

I made you a mask. And then I tore it off. I'm entitled to services rendered.

Deborah rips her things, one by one, from the hangers.

DEBORAH

Give me back my things. How dare you unravel me this way!

JOE

How dare you savage Reed River Flow! It's dying now. Fast, it's dying. And you, yes you, will swing the butcher's hand. With all your selfish wants. And all your sordid glories. You can't claim a whiff for your children or their children's' children's future.

DEBORAH

I hate you and every scumbag who comes between me and mine! I earned every penny that I have. The hard way! I crawled up the ladder on my belly; I took no short cuts. Yes, I've got cars and minks and boats. If I were white, I'd be on the cover of "Time!"

What did this place ever do for me? All the pain, the privations, the compromises, humiliations — the stupid people! Every moment snuffed out by some painkiller — or three or four!

(hysterical)

So give me back my things. You can burn the fucking planet! Burn it when I'm gone!

JOE

Then be gone. And be damned.

Deborah wrestles with her bags — then abandons them, exploding out the front door.

EXT. JOE'S TRAILER — DAY — CONTINUOUS

EXTREME CLOSE on wheels spinning snow and gravel, mucking the camera eye. The Lincoln swerves in the turret like a toboggan and picks up speed.

EXT. HILLSIDE & MAIN — DAY

Officer Malone tips his hat as the cars leave.

OFFICER MALONE

Donations for the road crew? Donations anyone? Our road crew braved sub zero temperatures last night to clear these roads. Donations for the crew?

EXT. ON RAMP, HWY. 87 — DAY — CONTINUOUS

Five Tompkins Children hide in ambush. As cars slow down to make the turn, they clobber them with an ARSENAL OF SNOWBALLS.

TOMPKIN CHILDREN
Have a Visher Ferry Christmas!

The kids throw as many as they can, screaming and laughing.

EXT. FIRETRUCK/MAIN STREET — DAY — CONTINUOUS

We are TRACKING in SLOW MOTION a bright red FIRE TRUCK rolling down Main Street like a gray whale gliding through coastal waters. Instead of firemen, FIVE NURSES IN CRISP WHITE UNIFORMS (mixed nationalities) smile and wave like queens at the Rose Bowl Parade.

EXT. HILLSIDE & MAIN — DAY — CONTINUOUS

A car slows down, drops a bill into Malone's hat, then picks up speed.

OFFICER MALONE
Thanks, friend. Donations anyone?

EXT. ON RAMP, HWY. 87 — DAY — CONTINUOUS

Another snowball attack by the Five Tompkins Children.

TOMPKINS CHILDREN
Have a Visher Ferry Christmas!

The smallest girl slips on the ice and lands on her butt, laughing uproariously.

EXT. HILLSIDE & MAIN — DAY — CONTINUOUS

In the distance the LINCOLN CONTINENTAL lurches dangerously in line, bucking for position. Suddenly, it breaks rank and rushes up the wrong side of the street.

The Five Tompkins Children drop everything and run SCREAMING.

Unperturbed, Officer Malone tips his hat to Deborah as she passes.

OFFICER MALONE
Donations ma'am?

The Lincoln lumbers by, the front windows open, Deborah crying uncontrollably.

DEBORAH

I'm confused. I'm just so confused.

She swerves onto the on ramp.

Officer Malone watches sadly, then tips his hat to the next passing motorist.

OFFICER MALONE

Donations gratefully accepted!

EXT. DINAH'S LANTERN — DAY

Julia and Jason walk down the steps carrying "to go" cups. Jason clutches his gift — a PLASTIC ROSARY (*a la* "Sesame Street"). [The keenly observant will notice all the waitresses now wearing nurses' uniforms.]

Julia nudges Jason and points: CLOSE ON — Mayor Tompkins feeding cheese cubes to a mother raccoon and her babies beneath the porch. Ernie looks puff-eyed and humbled.

Something catches Jason's eye.

JASON

He lied!

JULIA

Who?

JASON

(pointing)

There are too Jews in Visher Ferry!

EXT. TOWN SQUARE — DAY — CONTINUOUS

Huddled against the cold, WOODY ALLEN stands alone in line for an early matinee. A crumbly old theater boasts, "The Bells of St. Mary's."

EXT. DINAH'S LANTERN — DAY — CONTINUOUS

Julia and Jason climb into their RICKETY VW. In her rearview mirror, Julia notices an UPSCALE PALESTINIAN FAMILY climbing into a SHINY NEW SUV.

Julia starts the car, shifts in reverse, backs out and — accidentally on purpose — dings the SUV. She straightens her wheels and squeals out of the lot.

INT. PARKING LOT & MAIN — DAY — CONTINUOUS

JULIA'S POV: she adjusts her rearview mirror, noticing with satisfaction the Palestinian Man waving his fist after her. He leaps into his car. She shifts up a gear.

EXT. NORTHBOUND ON RAMP, HWY. 87 — DAY — MOMENTS LATER

Julia's VW slides around the turn and accelerates. A beat. The SUV makes the same turn while a FIST raises from the driver's window. Julia's hand emerges, FLIPPING THE BIRD, and the chase is on!

INT. KITCHEN, AVA'S TOWNHOUSE — DAY

Officer Malone sits in a chair opposite Ava. The room is shaded and mute. Ava sips her coffee, eyes glued to Malone.

He reaches slowly into his pocket and pulls out a FELT CASE. He removes a RING and slips it on her finger. He leaves the case on the table. Sips coffee.

AVA

That's it? You're not even going to ask? Slam, bam, thank you ma'am?

MALONE

I'm not good at this sort of thing.

AVA

You're not supposed to be good at it. It's only supposed to happen once. You don't just sling it on her finger and dunk your donut.

MALONE

Ava Marshall, will you be my bride?

Ava regards the ring indifferently.

AVA

As a basis for what?

I don't know what to call your thunder rattling me in the night. But I like it. I don't know if you love me, but you smile like a lost puppy in a spring rain and it makes me smile. I don't know if I love you or if this thrill we manage has any meaning or direction. I don't know if I'd trade you in for a cup of mousse, my Chardonnay and a favorite tape.

We have a lust that leaks rage, as we hide beneath the covers, too ashamed to name it.

You drag in the tar of the world and leave streaks that don't wash away. I don't know when, one fine day, I'll turn on you and turn you out, feeling sullied.

(removes ring)

No, you can keep your ring, but you can have my key, under the milk bottle. And you can visit me. For a while.

(notes his dejection)

You see, with us, it's better not to talk.

She slides the box slowly back across the table.

OFFICER MALONE

I never really feel I need someone, anyone really, until I see those two together. A fun couple. Reminds me of my grandparents on the farm. The autonomy. The pleasure. The industry. These days, it's almost cruel to see it. To be reminded what we've lost. That life is less without it.

Officer Malone drops a tear, then chokes it back. Ava slowly draws his head into her breast. He kneels, releasing a floodgate into her. She gently strokes his head.

EXT. BACK ENTRANCE, DINAH'S LANTERN — DAY

Mayor Tompkins walks up the side of the building picking up TRASH. At the back door he finds Sam sleeping at the base of the door. A RICH WARM LIGHT emanates from every window, keyhole and crack of Dinah's Lantern, including the base of the door frame, which warms Sam's spine.

Mayor Tompkins helps up Sam and steers him inside.

EXT. NORTHBOUND HWY. 87 — DAY

We are TRACKING THE FIRE TRUCK, FROM BEHIND AND ABOVE, SIRENS BLARING. It slows and stops behind dozens of PARKED CARS at a PERMANENT BARRICADE. Highway 87 abruptly ends. There are no exits. Untrammeled Nature lies mysteriously beyond.

The SIRENS are cut. Five Nurses step off the truck and, instead of hoses, pull the lids off large platters of holiday canapés.

DOZENS OF TRAVELERS climb out of their vehicles or loll about in small groups as if this dead end is the most natural thing in the world or the temperature isn't chilly. The Nurses circulate among the crowd, offering holiday treats with gracious smiles.

A SMALL CROWD has gathered on the shoulder to observe a large, clumsy, GIGANTIC BILLBOARD for Coppertone sunscreen [or derivative ad]. Noisy, movable panels BANG awkwardly. A black Scottish Terrier pulls down the little girl's bottoms. AD GIRL (Wendy) draws a finger to her lips in a "cupie doll" expression.

Beneath, a YOUNG BOY in hooded ski jacket buzzes a MOTORIZED AIRPLANE around Ad Girl's head via remote control. It buzzes around and around like an annoying bee. A REAL SCOTTISH TERRIER sits near him, wagging its tail.

Julia works through the crowd, guiding the gaze of the Palestinian Man (no longer angry).

JULIA
(pointing)
You see? That's one of my Ex's! Isn't it hideous?

Deborah also walks into the group, absorbing the spectacle with new eyes. Several Travelers point their fingers and begin to laugh. The LAUGHING compounds into an ECHOING CACOPHONY of derision.

INT A HEARTH IN DEEP SPACE — NIGHT

Wendy jumps up angrily — a shrill, adult bitterness wiping out every last vestige of childhood.

WENDY
(harshly)
That's not fair!
(slaps him)
You cheated! I wanted to save everyone and you

GRANDPA

You did save everyone, princess! You saved a lot of unnecessary exposition!

WENDY

(screams in his face)

You POOP!

(plops down grumpily)

What else did you lie about? Never mind. I'll never take you seriously again.

GRANDPA

Come on, now. How about a little eggnog.

WENDY

(brightening)

They make eggnog up here?

GRANDPA

Everything you ever wanted. All you ever asked for.

WENDY

With marshmallows on top?

GRANDPA

I'll do better than that. How about a little slip of rum?

WENDY

I don't want to fall asleep again. It takes so long to wake up.

GRANDPA

A common predicament.

WENDY

What time is it?

GRANDPA

Up here, there's just no telling.

WENDY

Why not?

GRANDPA

'Cause here, everything just blends together. What went before. What's coming after. From this point forward, it's all a fall from grace.

WENDY

(feels his face, suddenly worried)

Grandpa, can I visit you when you die?

GRANDPA

(long pause; so tender)

My dearest darling, I just did.

Wendy's body suddenly slumps; her head rolls over like a rag doll. Grandpa kisses her on the forehead. We PULL BACK in a slow, imperceptible retreat.

GRANDA (Cont'd)

But don't worry, love, you'll wake soon enough. You'll forget all this, you and I. You'll wake and remember you're Lorraine and 42 again. Living alone. Two cats, Buster and Lilly, asleep on your lap. The hanky you clutch, still wet from crying. Your robe and pajamas, your only friends.

You'll remember you walked off your job on Christmas Eve. You'll never forget that final day. The holiday party in full swing.

You carried a plate for your favorite patient, only to find he'd died of AIDS. His mother called that very morning, stuck in traffic and could she call another day?

Or the stock market whiz in the bed adjacent, who shrugged and asked for a better room.

Or the surgeon who balls you out in front of the patients.

Or the director who gropes you while handing a stingy bonus check.

Or the benefactress parading the halls, bedecked with diamonds and mink: you wonder how the earth will ever support us if we all decide to live this way.

The night guard phones you at home. You're ashamed to admit you're all ablaze. You're tired and needful, but forced to confront all who bed you and dumped you, and can you take the loneliness of the city another day?

Your mother complains you never phone. It took you three days to sleep off the alcohol.

You became a nurse to heal but found a world opposed to your own self care. That's when you wipe your tears, close your eyes and come to me —

Wendy, apparently sleep walking, crawls off Grandpa's lap. She opens a TRAP DOOR in the floor and steps down a staircase into a BRILLIANT BLUE SKY, pulling the hatch behind her.

— with all your tears and all your pleadings. And ask for Heavenly pie in the sky. And I'll conjure up another tale, made to order. Whatever you ask, I'll soon deliver. No limit of any kind. And you'll get all you ever asked for, at least in Dream. For it's here we're all united, in a stream of love from heart to heart. All you ever won or lost, returned one day. And all your tears turn to laughter. And all your laughter melts away.

It all returns to Love.

So rest my child. And dream of waking. For the sun is never so breathless than after a bitter storm.

Grandpa rocks in his chair, by now, a warm cozy dot in a vast expanse.

- THE END -